Billie Bradley and Her Inheritance

$3.00

Janet D. Wheeler

Mildred Desmond

From Celeste Kinney.

Christmas, 1924.

"There it is!" Billie said. "My inheritance!"

(See Page 107)

BILLIE BRADLEY AND HER INHERITANCE

OR

THE QUEER HOMESTEAD AT CHERRY CORNERS

BY

JANET D. WHEELER

AUTHOR OF "BILLIE BRADLEY AT THREE-TOWERS HALL," ETC.

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BILLIE BRADLEY SERIES

BY JANET D. WHEELER

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BILLIE BRADLEY AND HER INHERITANCE
OR THE QUEER HOMESTEAD AT CHERRY CORNERS

BILLIE BRADLEY AT THREE TOWERS HALL
OR LEADING A NEEDED REBELLION

BILLIE BRADLEY ON LIGHTHOUSE ISLAND
OR THE MYSTERY OF THE WRECK

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BILLIE BRADLEY AND HER INHERITANCE

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BILLIE BRADLEY AND HER INHERITANCE

CHAPTER I

AN ACCIDENT

"AREN'T you glad that we are only going back to school for a little while?" cried Billie Bradley, as she gave a little exultant skip. "Suppose it were fall and we were beginning high——"

"Billie, stop it," commanded Laura Jordon, turning a pair of very blue and very indignant eyes upon her chum. "I thought we were going to forget school for a little while."

"Well, we're not going back for anything I forgot," Billie was asserting when Violet Farrington, the third of the trio, interposed:

"If you two are going to quarrel on a day like this, I'm going home."

"Who said we were quarreling?" cried Billie, adding with a chuckle: "We're just having what Miss Beggs" (Miss Beggs being their English teacher) "would call an 'amiable discussion.'"

"Listen to the bright child!" cried Laura mockingly. "I don't see how you ever get that way, Billie."

"Neither do I," replied Billie, adding with a chuckle as they turned to stare at her: "Just natural talent, I guess."

The three chums—and three brighter, prettier girls it would be hard to find—were on their way to the grammar school which had just closed the week before. Laura had forgotten a book which she prized highly and was in hope that the janitor, a good-natured old fellow, would let her in long enough to get it. At the last minute she had asked the other girls to go with her.

The three chums had lived in North Bend, a town of less than twenty thousand people, practically all their lives. The girls loved it, for it was a pretty place. Still, being only forty miles by rail from New York City, they had been taken to the roaring metropolis once in a while as a treat, and it was only with great difficulty that their parents had succeeded in luring them home again.

Among other things North Bend boasted a jewelry factory, of which Raymond Jordon, Laura's father, was the owner.

Billie's father was the prominent Martin Bradley, well known among real estate and insurance men, and it was from him that Billie, whose real name was Beatrice, had taken her brown eyes and brown

hair and even that merry, irrepressible imp of mischief that made Billie Bradley the most popular, best-loved girl in all North Bend.

Her mother, Agnes Bradley, quiet, sincere and beautiful to look upon, kept just the check on her gay young daughter that the young girl needed.

Billie had a brother, Chetwood Bradley, commonly known as "Chet"—a boy as different from his sister as night is from day, yet, in his own more quiet way, extremely attractive.

Laura's brother, Theodore, known to his intimates as Teddy, was a handsome boy, as full of wild spirits as Billie herself. Teddy had entertained a lively admiration for Billie Bradley since he was seven and she was six. Teddy was tall for his fifteen years, and had already made a name for himself in the field of athletics.

The third of the chums was Violet Farrington, a daughter of Richard Farrington, a well-known lawyer of North Bend, and Grace Farrington, a sweet, motherly woman.

Nearly everybody loved Violet, who was tall and dark and sweet-tempered. She also acted as a sort of perpetual peace-maker between brown-eyed Billie and blue-eyed Laura.

So now she was acting again on this glorious day in July when the roses were out and the birds were singing and the sun was shining its brightest.

"What shall we do if we can't get in?" suggested

Billie, waving her hand to Nellie Bane, another girl in her class, who passed on the opposite side of the street.

"I suppose we'd have to go home again," answered Laura, adding with a little worried frown: "Oh, I do hope I can get the book. I wouldn't lose it for anything."

"There goes Amanda Peabody," cried Violet suddenly, clutching Billie's arm.

"That makes no difference in my young life," Billie slangily assured her.

"As long as she *goes,* it's all right," added Laura, glancing after the lanky figure of Amanda Peabody as the girl swung off in the other direction.

Amanda Peabody was not popular with the girls. Nor was she with anybody, for that matter. As far as the girls knew, she had not one friend in the whole school.

Amanda was red-haired and freckled; and while these attributes alone could not have accounted for her unpopularity, she added to them a tendency to spy upon the other girls and then run and tell what she had seen or heard.

It was this last characteristic that no fair-minded girl would tolerate and so Amanda had lived in practical ostracism ever since she had come to North Bend two years before.

"I don't think we ought to be too hard on her," said Violet, as they turned the corner that brought

the school into view. "She can't help her mean disposition, I suppose. And anyway, Miss Beggs says there's always some good to be found in everybody."

"Maybe," said Billie skeptically, "but hers is so small you would need a microscope to see it. There's the janitor now, just going out. If we run we can catch him."

And run they did, presenting themselves a minute later, rather red in the face and out of breath, before a very much amused janitor.

"Hello," he cried, his twinkling eyes under their shaggy brows lighting with pleasure as he looked at the girls. "Are you young ladies tryin' to catch a train, or what?"

"Oh, no, no," cried Violet eagerly. "We were just trying to catch you, Mr. Heegan."

"Oh-ho! An' it's mighty flattered I am," said Mr. Heegan, his Irish brogue coming to the fore. "An' what, if I might be askin' you——"

"It's a book we left here," Billie broke in quickly. "Laura wants to know if you will let us in long enough to get it."

"Sure, an' I will that," Mr. Heegan assured them, leading the way into the school yard and pulling out his bunch of keys. "It must be a verra important book," he added, smiling at them as he fitted the key in the lock, "to be bringing you back to school after school's out."

"It was a gift from Father," Laura explained. "And I wouldn't lose it for anything."

"All right, there you go," said the good-natured janitor, swinging the door wide for them. "I'm goin' home, but I'll be comin' back in a few minutes to lock up. You'd best not be stayin' here then," he added, with a twinkling backward glance at them, "or it will be locked up for the night you'll be."

"We won't be more than a minute," Violet assured him, and jubilantly the girls ran through the empty, echoing hall and stopped before a door at the farther end.

"It seems so horribly quiet," said Violet, looking around at them with her hands on the door knob. "It makes you feel like a thief."

"Must be your guilty conscience," said Laura wickedly. "Come on, Vi; we've got to hurry if we don't want to be 'locked in for the night.'"

"Are you sure you left the book here, Laura?" asked Billie, as Violet opened the door and they crowded in. "It would be too bad if it were gone——"

But a cry from Laura interrupted her.

"There it is," she said, running to a desk at the farther end of the room and picking up from an inner corner a prettily bound book. "Just the very place I left it, too. My, but I'm glad to get it back again."

"What do you think you're doing, Billie Brad-

ley?" inquired Laura a minute later, for Billie had seated herself at the teacher's desk and was looking as severe as she knew how.

"Take your seats," she now commanded, rapping vigorously on the desk and fixing them with her best school-teacher stare. "Violet Farrington, go to the board——"

But she got no further, for with an indignant cry the girls had rushed on her. Dropping both her air of command and her dignity, Billie scurried wildly around the room, keeping the desks between her and her pursuers.

"You can't catch me! You can't catch me!" she taunted them, as she dodged nimbly in and out among the desks. "I could keep this up all day, I could——"

"Oh, you could, could you?" cried Laura, and, making a desperate lunge, she almost had her hand on Billie's dress. "We'll see about that. Billie! what are you doing?"

For Billie had suddenly doubled on her tracks, rushed to the back of the room, put her foot upon a steam radiator pipe and was trying to clamber to the top of a bookcase.

It was a tall bookcase, and on the top of it stood a marble statue.

"Billie, look out!" screamed Violet as the bookcase shook and the statue seemed about to topple over by reason of Billie's wild scrambling.

"You won't catch me this time," Billie was defying them, when—the awful thing happened!

The marble statue toppled once more, trembled as though it were not quite sure whether to fall or stay where it was, then came tumbling to the floor with a crash.

The girls cried out, and then stood dumbly looking at the pieces.

CHAPTER II

THAT HUNDRED DOLLARS

BILLIE BRADLEY clambered down from her perch in awed silence.

"Girls," she said, her voice very low and solemn, "that 'Girl Reading a Book' statue was worth a hundred dollars."

The girls started, and Laura cried out:

"How do you know it cost that much?"

"I heard Miss Beggs say so," Billie replied dully. "Now I certainly have done it. Girls, what shall I do?"

"It—it couldn't be put together again, could it?" suggested Violet weakly, leaning down to examine the pieces.

"Of course it couldn't," sniffed Laura, adding suddenly: "I suppose we could run away and nobody would know the dif——"

"Look," cried Billie, excitedly pointing to one of the windows.

Following the direction of her glance the girls were just in time to see the freckled face and mean

little eyes of Amanda Peabody disappear from the window.

"Oh, that sneak!" cried Laura in a rage, rushing across to the window while the other girls followed close at her heels. "I wish I were a boy and she were another one. I'd just show her!"

"Well, now she will tell and we couldn't run away even if we wanted to," said Billie, sinking down on a bench and looking at them wistfully. "Of course we wouldn't really have wanted to," she added, after a minute of uncomfortable silence. "Only it makes me mad to *have* to do the right thing. Oh, I don't see why somebody doesn't run that Amanda person out of town," she went on, doubling up her fists and looking as if it might have been just as well for that "Amanda person" that she was not there at the minute.

"Teddy says he calls her 'Nanny,'" said Violet, with a flash of humor, "because it 'gets her goat.'"

"Sounds just like Ted," said Billie, with a smile. Then her face sobered again as she realized the gravity of the situation.

"Of course I'll have to make it good," she said, going over to the pieces again and regarding them mournfully. "But how in the world am I ever going to get together a hundred dollars? It might just as well be a thousand as far as I'm concerned." The last was a wail.

"Won't your father give you the money?" asked

Laura, for to Laura's father a hundred dollars was only a drop in the bucket.

But Billie only shook her head while her face became still more grave.

"He would if he could," she said, "but I heard him say only the other day that times are hard and everything is terribly expensive, and I know he is worried. Oh, girls, I'm in a terrible fix!"

"I know you are, honey," said Violet, coming over and putting a comforting arm about her. "But there must be some way that we can fix things all right."

"I'd like to know how," grumbled Laura, who had chosen to take the gloomy view. "We might," she added generously, after a moment's thought, "say that I broke it——"

"Laura—dear!" cried Billie, not quite sure whether to be offended or grateful for the generous suggestion. "It's wonderful of you, of course, but you know I couldn't do that."

"And there's Amanda Peabody," added Violet. "She wouldn't let us get away with anything like that."

At which Laura nodded again, still more gloomily.

"Well," cried Billie, straightening up suddenly and trying to look hopeful, "I suppose it won't do any good to stand here and look at the pieces. Besides," she added with a start, "we've been here a

terribly long time, and we don't want the janitor to lock us in."

They started for the door on the run, but Billie suddenly turned, ran back and began gathering up the pieces of the broken statue.

"What are you going to do?" asked Violet, regarding her curiously.

"What does it look as if I were doing?" asked Billie, reaching for an old newspaper that lay in the forgotten paper basket. "I might as well have the evidence of my crime. Anyway, I want to take them to Miss Beggs."

"Do you know where she lives?" asked Laura, stooping and helping Billie at her task.

"She sent me there one time to get some papers," Billie explained, as she rose to her feet, clutching the newspaper package. "It's a boarding house on Main Street, only a few blocks from here."

"Shall we go there now?" asked Violet as they closed the door softly behind them and started down the hall.

"We might as well," answered Billie, with a sigh. "The sooner I get it over with, the better I'll feel. But oh, that hundred dollars!"

"Never mind, we'll get it if we have to steal it," said Laura firmly, as they came out into the flower-sweet air.

"That would be like jumping from the frying pan

into the fire," remarked Violet, at which the girls had to laugh.

As they swung out through the gate they met Mr. Heegan coming in, and he smiled at them from under his bushy brows.

"Did you get what you were after comin' for?" he asked them.

"Yes. And something we didn't come for," answered Billie, while the color flooded her face and she felt like a criminal. She smiled a wry little smile and displayed the newspaper package.

"Meanin'——" Mr. Heegan began, puzzled.

"I—I broke a statue that was on the bookcase," explained Billie. "We were skylarking——"

"And many's the time I've done the same in my day," said Mr. Heegan, with a nod, looking not nearly as shocked as the girls thought he would. "And sure, what are you made young for, if it wasn't that you was meant to be skylarkin' all the time?"

The girls looked at each other. This strange sentiment had never occurred to them before, but they found it very comforting, nevertheless.

"But—but," stammered Billie, "this statue cost a hundred dollars. And it was given to Miss Beggs by a rich uncle."

"Well, all I have to say is, that any one who would spend a hundred dollars on a statue," said Mr. Heegan, "deserves to have it broken on him."

And having delivered himself of this surprising comment, the janitor saluted and ambled off into the school yard, leaving the girls to look after him with laughing eyes.

"You know I just love Irishmen," remarked Billie with emphasis, as they started on their way once more.

In thoughtful silence, they walked the remaining three blocks to the boarding house where Miss Beggs lived.

"This is it," said Billie, as she came to a stop before a three-story brick building that had all the respectable and uncomfortable appearance of a typical boarding house.

"Just like Miss Beggs," Billie was conscious of thinking.

"Well, let's go up," urged Laura, as Billie showed no inclination to move. "We might as well get the agony over with."

"All right, come on," cried Billie, running ahead of them and taking two steps at a time. "As Dad says: 'A coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave man only one.' "

The end of this quotation brought them to the porch, and Billie looked for the bell.

"Now then," she said, and braced herself for the ordeal.

A stout, middle-aged person, without any of the outward characteristics that are so often bestowed

upon landladies in general, opened the door and looked at them inquiringly.

"Is there some one you wish to see?" she asked them.

"Yes," replied Billie in a weak little voice. "I would like to see Miss—Miss Beggs if she is at home."

"She isn't," said the middle-aged person. "She went away for the summer two days ago."

"Did she leave any address?" Billie managed to ask.

"No, she didn't; but I guess I could find out from one of the other ladies who is a friend of hers," the woman volunteered obligingly. "That is, if it's very particular," she added.

"Oh, yes it is," said Billie earnestly. "I would be very much obliged if you could get me her address."

"Well, I can't just now, because the lady that knows it isn't at home. But if you'll leave me your address I'll send it to you as soon's I find it out. Have you paper and pencil?"

The girls had not.

"Wait then, and I'll get something on which to write your address."

The landlady went inside, closing the door after her, and in spite of herself Billie uttered a little sigh of relief. She felt very much like a reprieved criminal.

A moment later the woman reappeared with a pencil and paper and painstakingly wrote down the address Billie gave her.

"Thank you so much," said the latter, as she turned away. "You won't forget to send it just the first minute you can, will you?"

The woman nodded and closed the door with a little bang.

"I wonder why she didn't ask us in," said Laura, as they ran down the steps. "It was queer to keep us waiting outside."

"Yes, it makes you feel like a book agent," chuckled Billie. "But oh, girls," she added, "I didn't know how much I dreaded facing Miss Beggs till I found out I didn't have to. I don't mind writing to her nearly so much."

With somewhat lighter steps and lighter hearts they turned toward home. But Billie could not get the hundred-dollar statue which she had broken out of her mind.

"I feel," said Laura, as they were turning the corner into her own street, "as if I ought to pay for that horrid old statue, Billie."

"What do you mean?" queried Billie, while Violet regarded her with wide open eyes.

"Well, if it hadn't been for me and my old book," she explained, "we wouldn't have gone back to school, and then you wouldn't have gotten yourself into all that trouble. I really do feel guilty," she

added earnestly. "I wish you would at least let me help you pay for it, Billie."

Billie put an arm about the girl and squeezed her lovingly.

"And I suppose you're to blame for my climbing the bookcase, too," she chided her fondly. "No, Laura dear, it's all my fault and you can't make me put the blame on any one else. But, oh!" she wailed, "how in the world am I ever going to raise that hundred dollars?"

CHAPTER III

CHET HELPS

THE sun was flooding Billie Bradley's room when she awoke the next morning, and she sat up in bed with the feeling that it must be very late. She glanced at the little clock on the dresser and saw that its hands pointed to half-past eight.

"Oh, I'll be late to school," was her first thought. Then she checked herself and laughed.

"School!" she said, stretching her arms above her head with a delicious sense of freedom. "As the old man said: 'They ain't no sech animile.' I guess I might just as well get up, though, for I feel as if I were starving to death."

She was just putting her feet into very pretty bedroom slippers when she remembered the tragedy —or so it seemed to her—of the day before.

The long night's rest had driven from her mind all thoughts of the statue. Was it really only yesterday that she had broken it? The thing seemed to have been on her conscience forever!

" 'Girl Reading a Book,' " she said disdainfully, as she began to brush her hair vigorously. "Horrid

old thing! I suppose she was a grind anyway, like Amanda Peabody."

The thought of Amanda did not serve to lift her spirits any, and it was in a rather gloomy mood that she finally descended to the breakfast table.

To make things worse, she found that all the rest of her family, including Chet, had breakfasted bright and early, which meant that she would have to eat her breakfast in lonely state.

The room was cheerful with sunlight, for Mrs. Bradley had often said that a bright dining-room had more to do with making a happy home than any other one thing. But this morning Billie did not even notice it.

She opened the swinging door to the kitchen and peeped in cautiously to see whether Debbie, their black and much pampered cook, was in a good enough mood to cook her some breakfast.

A cheerful aroma greeted her, and she sniffed at it longingly. Bacon and eggs and—was it corn bread that Debbie was just taking out of the oven?

"Oh, Debbie, give me something to eat, quick," she cried. "I'm starving."

Debbie turned and favored her with a large black stare.

"Dem dat gets up at nine o'clock in de mo'nin'," she declared, "done deserves to go hungry, Miss Billie, beggin' your pardon." Her tone matched the severity of her gaze.

"Oh, but, Debbie," said Billie, using the coaxing tone that even black Deborah, tyrant of the household, could never quite resist, "remember how many mornings I have had to get up at seven and go out in the drizzling rain and——"

"All right, honey, all right," said Deborah, her heart touched by this reference to the hardships her young mistress had suffered. "You go in 'tother room an' don't bother Debbie an' she'll bring you in the prettiest breakfast you ever did see."

Somewhat cheered by this promise, Billie retreated into the sun-flooded dining-room, and, going over to a window under which flowers bloomed gayly in boxes, looked out at the pretty view.

From where she stood she commanded a full view of the tennis court, on which she could see that a warm set of singles was in progress. One of the players was Chet, and as she watched she saw him fling his racket high in the air.

"My set, Tom!" he cried. "That puts us even. Play you the rubber this afternoon. So long!" and with his tennis balls in his hand and his racket under his arm he sauntered over toward home.

"Dear old Chet!" murmured Billie fondly.

Then came the thought of that hundred dollars she must get some way or other, and suddenly there flashed into her mind a little ray of hope.

"Maybe Chet could help," she thought, and then laughed at herself for thinking it. Chet had just

about as much chance of getting that hundred dollars as she had herself.

At that moment Debbie came in with her fruit and cereal, and she turned from the window with a sigh.

"I might as well eat," she thought resignedly, "for if I starve myself to death or die of worry, there won't be anybody left to pay for that old book worm."

Then her irrepressible imp of mischief reasserted itself and she laughed.

"Hello, look at the grand lady," a fresh young voice called to her from the doorway. She turned with a spoon half way to her mouth to see her brother laughing at her.

"What was that you called me?" she asked. As a matter of fact, her thoughts had been so far away that she actually had not heard what he said.

"Say, what's the matter?" asked Chet, flinging his tennis racket into one chair and seating himself on the arm of another. "Are you sick?"

"Yes. Or if I'm not, I ought to be," replied Billie ruefully, at which peculiar remark Chet looked still more amazed.

"Now what particular thing is worrying you?" he asked in an argumentative tone, leaning toward her. "Come, 'fess up, Billie. What have you been doing when my back was turned? Robbing a bank?"

"Oh, much worse than that!" cried Billie unexpectedly, and her brother's good-looking face began to take on an expression of alarm.

"Worse?" he queried. "There's only about one thing worse—and that's murder."

"Oh, Chet, that's just what I did," she cried, her imp of mischief uppermost. "I murdered a 'Girl Reading a Book.' "

"Well," said Chet, taking this startling bit of information more calmly than would have been thought possible, "you don't seem very much worried about it."

"Oh, but, Chet, I am!" once more the cloud banished the merry gleam in Billie's eyes. "Wait till I show you."

She left her breakfast, ran upstairs, and was back in a minute with the newspaper parcel.

"Here she is," she cried, displaying the contents tragically.

Chet fingered one or two of the broken bits. Then he looked at her curiously.

"Go on, 'fess up," he commanded. "Tell yours truly all about it."

This Billie did in the fewest words possible and then sat down to the bacon and eggs that Debbie had placed temptingly on the table. And cornbread! Debbie's cornbread was a masterpiece.

When Billie had finished Chet looked grave.

"Well," he said, fingering the pieces thoughtfully,

"it does seem as if the only square thing to do would be to replace it."

"Oh, I must, Chet—I must!" she interrupted earnestly.

"But how?" he asked. "A hundred dollars is a lot of money."

"I know," agreed Billie miserably.

"I don't think Dad will be able to make it good just now," went on Chet, in that sober tone that made people in North Bend feel confidence in Chetwood Bradley, young as he yet was. "I heard him say the other day that all his capital was tied up. And then it costs so much to live——"

"Oh, I know all that!" broke in Billie desperately, then added, looking up at her brother appealingly: "Chet dear, I've got to find the money to replace that statue some way! Won't you help me?"

"You bet your life I will," cried Chet, with a hearty boyishness that made Billie's eyes glow. "I'll do everything I can, Sis. I tell you——" he paused as a thought struck him.

"Oh, what?" she cried, grasping his arm as he started from the room. "Oh, Chet, tell me."

"I'll show you in a minute," he promised, and was off, up the stairs, taking them three at a time, judging from the noise he made.

In what seemed to Billie no time at all he was back again, holding something in his hand that jingled.

"Here's a dollar and fifteen cents," he said, holding out to her all his available wealth. "I almost forgot I had it. You can use it to start the fund."

"Oh, Chet!" Billie's eyes were wet and she hugged him fondly. "You're the very darlingest brother I ever had!"

"And the *only* one——" Chet was beginning, when Billie interrupted him by breaking away and putting a finger to her forehead.

"Let me think——"

"Impossible," he cried in a deep voice.

"Chet," she said, speaking quickly, "I have seventy-five cents myself, and that with your dollar——"

"Dollar fifteen," Chet corrected gravely.

"Will make quite a respectable start to our fund." And she was off up the stairs in her turn, making almost as much noise as Chet had done.

In a moment she was back again with the precious seventy-five cents and a small tin box.

"Here's the bank," she cried gayly. "It will be real fun filling it up."

"Yes, but where are we going to get the money to fill it up with?" Chet reminded her and her bright face fell again.

"Oh, we'll find a way," she said with a confidence she was far from feeling. "Maybe Dad will help a little."

"Have you told him about it?" asked Chet.

"No. But I will to-night," she said, with a little sinking feeling. "I hate to tell him, awfully, but I suppose I'll have to."

"Well, don't worry anyway," said Chet, patting her shoulder reassuringly. "You know Dad says worry is a waste of time, because everything will all be the same a hundred years from now."

But Billie's shake of the head was very doubtful.

"I don't see how that helps me any—*now*," she said.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST HOPE

THAT afternoon Billie took herself and a book out on the porch and tried hard, but unsuccessfully, to forget her troubles. The more she tried to fix her attention on the printed page before her, the more the broken statue rose before her eyes until at last she closed the book with a slam and bounced impatiently in her seat.

"That horrid old 'Girl Reading a Book' has spoiled my whole summer for me," she said, her lips pouting rebelliously. "I wish I hadn't gone back to the old school anyway. I might have known it would bring me bad luck. Oh, here comes Laura," and her face brightened as she saw the familiar figure of her chum swinging up the street. "I wonder what she wants. Whatever it is, she seems to be in a terrible hurry about it."

"Hello, what's the rush?" she sang out, as Laura Jordon ran up the steps of the porch.

"It's—it's that—that Nanny goat Amanda Peabody!" cried Laura, panting a little, for she had in-

deed been in a hurry. "What do you think the old sneak has been up to now?"

"What?" queried Billie, as she moved over to make room for her chum in the seat beside her. "Telling tales again?"

"How did you guess it?" cried Laura, her face flushing with indignation. "And about you, Billie! Oh, I could have killed her!"

"Well, we expected it, didn't we?" Billie asked, in a matter-of-fact tone. "We knew when we saw her looking in at the window that that was exactly what she would do."

"Well, I know. But she went to the janitor about it." And Laura looked as if that in some way magnified the offense.

"Well, there wasn't any one else to go to," remarked Billie reasonably.

"Goodness! aren't you even mad about it?" asked Laura, her blue eyes snapping.

"Not particularly," replied Billie, for she was beginning to be terribly tired of the whole subject. How she hated that imbecile "Girl Reading a Book" and Amanda Peabody and—and—everybody!

"I got all over being angry with Amanda Peabody long ago," she said in answer to Laura's incredulous look. "If I should get that way every time she did anything, I'd never live to grow up!"

In spite of her indignation, Laura chuckled.

"I never did think of it in that way," she ad-

mitted, adding, after a minute's thought: "Billie, dear, haven't you thought of some way you might pay for the statue? I didn't sleep a wink last night for thinking of it."

"Neither did I," said Billie gloomily, forgetting that she had in reality slept very soundly. "Chet and I have started a fund with a dollar fifteen of his and seventy-five cents of mine. That's as far as we have got so far. I did think of Uncle Bill," she added slowly, mentioning a great uncle who occasionally visited them.

"Great! Uncle Bill!" repeated Laura, pricking up her ears. "The uncle who used to trot you on his knee and call you 'Bill's Billie'?"

"Yes," Billie nodded. "Uncle Bill and I were always good chums, and I think if I told him what a fix I'm in, he might be able to help. He has loads of money too."

"Billie," cried her chum rapturously, "why didn't you think of that before? Why, it's the very thing!"

"But I hate to ask him," sighed Billie, not sharing Laura's enthusiasm in the least. "I never had to ask anything of anybody before."

"Well, everything has to have a beginning," said Laura, lightly adding, as unconcernedly as she could: "I told Teddy about it last night."

"You did!" cried Billie, turning upon her while the color flooded her face. "Laura, what did you do that for?"

"You don't mind, do you?" queried Laura, wide-eyed. "I'm sure I never thought of your not wanting Teddy to know."

"Oh, I suppose it doesn't make any difference," sighed Billie, adding plaintively: "Only I don't like everybody to know how crazy I am."

"Teddy doesn't think you're crazy," said Laura, with a chuckle, regarding Billie out of the corner of her eye. "In fact, if I should tell you what he does think of you——"

"Oh, don't be foolish," almost snapped Billie, and again Laura chuckled inwardly.

"Well, you needn't be so cross," she said. "I can't help what Teddy does or thinks. Here he comes now," she added, glancing up the street.

"Oh, and I'm a perfect fright!" cried Billie, her hands flying to her hair—hair, by the way, which was arranged in the very best manner to set off Billie's sparkling prettiness. "Laura," she turned accusing eyes upon her chum, "tell the truth. Did you know he was coming?"

"No," said Laura honestly, adding with a little chuckle: "But I sort of had an idea that he might happen along."

If ever a boy looked handsome, it was Teddy Jordon as he swung up the street to Billie's house. He was very tall, looking more like a lad of eighteen than the fifteen years he was. His fair hair

waved back from a broad forehead, and his merry gray eyes sparkled with the joy of living.

"Hello!" he greeted the girls, as he took the porch steps two at a time and seated himself on the railing. "Laura has been telling me of your escapade, Billie Bradley, and I've come to find out what you mean by going about busting busts—that isn't good English, is it?"

"It doesn't sound just right," agreed Billie, dimpling adorably. "You speak as if I were bust—pardon me, *breaking* busts for a living. And it wasn't a bust, but a whole statue. No part way things for me!"

"There's Nellie Bane, I must speak to her," cried Laura, and before either of the others realized what she was up to, she was gone, leaving them alone.

Quite naturally Teddy came over and took the seat his sister had vacated.

"I say, Billie," he said, his handsome eyes regarding her frankly, "you know, I'm really awfully sorry about that business. It makes me mad that you should be troubled with it. You and I have always been pretty good friends, haven't we?" he finished unexpectedly.

Surprised, Billie answered warmly: "The very best of friends, Teddy. We ought to be," she added with a little laugh. "We've known each other pretty nearly forever."

"Then let me help," begged Teddy earnestly. "You

know my allowance is away more than I need——"

But Billie stopped him, shaking her head decidedly.

"You're a perfect angel, Teddy, to want to do it," she said. "But I really couldn't let you. Don't you know I couldn't?"

"I don't see why," grumbled Teddy, for after all he was only a boy, and just now a disappointed one. "Laura says you're set on replacing the thing——"

"Of course I'll have to," Billie said.

"And if you are going around getting yourself sick with worry, what sort of good time do you think the rest of us are going to have?" he burst out indignantly, and for the life of her Billie could not help smiling.

For a moment Teddy seemed undecided whether to laugh or be angry, but ended, as he nearly always did, by laughing.

"But it really isn't very funny," he reminded her when they had finished.

"Goodness! you don't have to tell me that," said Billie ruefully. "This is the first good laugh I've had since I broke the old thing."

Teddy looked penitent.

"I'm sorry," he said, adding, with a sudden smile: "I'm glad to know I'm good for something, anyway. I can still make you laugh."

"You very foolish boy," said Billie, patting his

hand affectionately. "As if that were all you were good for!"

"Well, if you feel that way, I don't see why you won't let me replace the statue," said Teddy, still nursing his disappointment. "Girls are funny, anyway."

"We know it," said Billie lightly. "But we can't help it. Listen, Teddy," and she leaned toward him confidentially. "I still have one hope left."

Then she told him about Uncle Bill and his fondness for her, and during the recital the boy brightened noticeably.

"Well, I hope the old boy comes up to the scratch," he commented disrespectfully, adding hurriedly as Laura said good-bye to Nellie Bane and started toward them: "And, Billie, if you change your mind about what I asked you let me know. Promise?"

Billie promised, and a few minutes later said good-bye to the brother and sister and watched them down the street with a very warm feeling somewhere in the region of her heart.

"Isn't it great to have friends?" she asked a robin that had perched itself on the edge of the porch and was looking at her knowingly. "And isn't Teddy the handsomest boy you ever saw?" to which the robin, knowing little rascal that he was, nodded not once but twice.

Chet came up on the porch a few minutes later and enticed Billie out for a game of tennis with him.

hoping to get her mind off the broken statue. But while she was too full of life and health not to enjoy the swift, swinging game that Chet gave her, the thought of "The Girl Reading a Book" stayed constantly in the back of her mind.

That night after dinner Billie broke the news to her father, and her heart sank as she saw the harassed look that came into his eyes.

"You say it cost a hundred dollars?" he queried, breaking a silence during which Billie had felt like a criminal awaiting sentence. Now she nodded unhappily.

"A hundred dollars," her father repeated. "Well, that's a lot to pay, Beatrice, for just a few minutes' reckless fun. Of course I can pay it, but that will mean putting off some affairs of more pressing importance——"

But Billie could stand it no longer, and with a little cry she flew to him and pressed her soft cheek against his.

"Daddy, I'm a brute to worry you like this!" she cried, penitently. "Please don't worry any more, dear. I'll find some way to replace the old thing myself."

Her father patted her cheek, but the worried frown still remained on his face. Billie started to leave the room but turned before she had reached the door.

"Dad," she said hesitatingly, and he turned to her

with a smile. "About Uncle Bill," she said. "He has always given me anything I wanted. Do you suppose he would help?"

"He is out of the country—gone on a business trip that has taken him on an ocean voyage," said her father. "He will be gone for an indefinite period. I thought you knew, Billie. Though, as he just left, I suppose it is not strange you had not heard us speak of it." And with that Mr. Bradley relapsed immediately into his brown study.

Billie opened the door and closed it softly behind her.

"My last hope!" she sighed plaintively. "Now what shall I do?"

CHAPTER V

WORSE AND WORSE

Two weeks passed, and still Billie Bradley had found no solution to her problem. The broken statue seemed as far from being paid for as ever, and, as far as she was concerned, the summer vacation was completely spoiled.

In this frame of mind she crushed a soft straw hat down over her brown hair one day and set out to find her chums, feeling the need of their sympathy. And how was she to know, poor Billie, that the news the girls would have to tell her would serve only to make her mood the blacker?

As she neared the Farrington home, Violet herself came rushing out to meet her, looking unusually and feverishly excited.

"Oh, Billie, what do you think?" she cried, encircling Billie with her arm and fairly dragging her up on the porch. "I have the most wonderful news to tell you!"

"What?" gasped Billie, for the unexpected onslaught had literally taken her breath away. "Good-

ness! you might as well kill me as scare me to death."

"Oh, but, Billie, you won't mind when I tell you," cried Violet, regarding her friend with dancing eyes. "The folks have decided to send me to Three Towers Hall!" Three Towers was a boarding school some distance from North Bend. "Laura is going too," Violet continued breathlessly. "And of course you will——" But something in Billie's face stopped her and she drew in her breath sharply.

"Oh, Billie," she cried, her face falling, "you're never going to tell me you can't go!"

"I guess that's just what I am going to tell you," said Billie, her fists clasped so tightly that the knuckles showed white. "I might have stood some chance if it hadn't been for that old statue. Now I can't get enough money to pay for that—much less go to Three Towers."

"Oh, that old statue!" cried Violet desperately, adding, while her face grew longer and longer: "What fun will there be, I'd like to know, in going to Three Towers if you can't go with us? And oh, Billie, I was making such wonderful plans!"

Billie had to turn away to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes. For to go to Three Towers Hall had long been the ambition of the chums, and now it was doubly hard to see her chance snatched away by an accident that could have been so easily avoided. If only she had not been so foolish!

Violet came over and put a loving arm about her friend.

"Never mind, honey," she said consolingly, forgetting her own disappointment in Billie's. "We'll find some way to get to Three Towers."

Billie smiled a wry little smile and made an effort to look as if there were still something to live for in the world.

"Laura told me that you thought your uncle might help you," said Violet, after an interval of unhappily trying to think of some way out of their trouble. "Neither Laura nor I will stir a step without you, that's a sure thing."

"Why, of course you will," said Billie, stopping the swing short and looking at her chum in amazement. "I'm sure your folks aren't going to let you stay at home from the school they've decided on just because I can't go with you. Although," and her voice broke a little, "it's just wonderful of you, Vi, to feel that way. You will go, of course, and you can write me beautiful letters about the wonderful times you are having."

"I won't do it!" cried Violet, springing to her feet. "I'm not going to Three Towers without you, and that settles it. I don't care if I had a thousand parents. Who's that turning the corner?" she interrupted herself to ask. "There's something familiar about that walk."

"Why, it's Ferd Stowing," said Billie, getting to

her feet for a better view. "My, but he looks happy about something. I wonder what's up."

The next moment Ferd Stowing, one of the best-liked boys in the town, came rushing up the steps like a whirlwind, and it did not take the girls long to find out "what was up."

"Hooray!" he cried, flinging his hat high in the air. "Wuxtry! All about Ferd Stowing and Ted Jordon!"

"For goodness' sake, stop bellowing and behave," Billie commanded. "What have you and Teddy been doing now?"

"Plenty. But that's nothing to what we're going to do," crowed Ferd exultantly. "He and I have at last persuaded our reluctant parents to send us to the military school. You know—the one that is only a little over a mile from Three Towers where you girls are going."

Again Billie felt as if she had been treated to a shower of ice water. Teddy and Ferd were going to Boxton Military Academy, and Chet—her darling, loyal Chet—would not be able to go with them. Her own disappointment seemed nothing at all beside this new tragedy.

"I was just on my way over to your house." Billie was conscious that Ferd was addressing her. "We haven't had a chance to get in touch with Chet yet. But the old boy will of course go with us, won't he? It wouldn't be any fun without Chet."

Almost the very words Violet had said to her, thought Billie, as she tried to swallow a sob and only succeeded in turning it into a funny little cough.

"He will, won't he?" Ferd was insisting, while Violet watched them with troubled eyes.

"Why—why—I don't know, Ferd," Billie stammered, trying to make her voice sound natural. "I do know one thing, and that is that Chet is crazy to go and will if he gets half a chance."

"Then I guess it's all right," said Ferd, leaning back with a sigh of relief. "Gee, I was afraid you were going to say he couldn't go, and so spoil everything. Say, can't you see the good times we're going to have with you girls at Three Towers Hall and we fellows such a little way off that we can see each other every once in a while? I can't make up my mind that it's real yet——" And so on and on, rapturously, while Billie's heart sank lower and lower and Violet's own warm one ached for her friend.

Then just as Ferd started to go he spied Chet coming up the street and hailed him joyfully.

"Just the fellow I wanted to see," he declared fervently. "Come on up here, old man, and hear the glad news."

Billie groaned inwardly and seemed about to speak, but Violet stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Might as well get it over with," she whispered.

"Chet is sure to hear of it later if he doesn't now."

So Billie waited, but her heart ached as she watched Chet march up smilingly to hear "the glad news."

"We're going to Boxton Military Academy." Ferd fairly shouted it at him. "How about it, old timer, are you going with us, or are you going to leave us in the lurch?"

The glad tidings staggered Chet for a minute, but he came on quietly and perched himself upon the railing, one foot swinging idly.

"You said you were going to the military academy?" he asked, his voice as quiet as his manner, but Billie noticed that the smile was gone. "By that I suppose you mean you and Teddy."

"And you," added Ferd, beaming upon him. "Billie said you were crazy to go."

Chet looked at Billie's unhappy face and tried to smile.

"Crazy to go!" he repeated. "I'll say I am. But——"

"But me no buts, Chet, my lad," broke in the impetuous Ferd. "I didn't ask you anything. I merely stated a fact."

"I—I'd give almost anything I own to make it a fact," said Chet, his eyes on the ground. "But I'm very much afraid you'll have to guess again, old man."

"Guess again? Well, I should say not!" cried

Ferd, getting to his feet indignantly. "Why, the thing can't be done without you, Chet. Didn't Billie say——"

"Billie only said," interrupted Violet, coming to Billie's rescue, "that Chet was crazy to go and would if he had half a chance."

Ferd sank back in his chair, too dismayed to speak.

"Well, of all—— Say, old man, you've got to go," and he turned to Chet pleadingly. "What sort of a party do you think this is going to be anyway, with Billie at Three Towers Hall and you back here in North Bend? It's not fair."

"Not fair," flared Billie. "You don't suppose I'd go to Three Towers and leave Chet here, do you?"

"Then you're not going either?" cried Ferd, seeing all his castles in the air coming down about his ears with a crash.

Billie shook her head unhappily.

"No, I'm not going either," she said.

CHAPTER VI

DEBBIE DESERTS

Billy Bradley really tried to be cheerful in the days that followed, but try as she would she could not altogether keep out the vision of Three Towers Hall, the boarding school to which she had wanted to go ever since—well, almost since she had wanted anything.

Laura and Violet would go without her. They would have to go, even in spite of their loyal determination not to. Their parents would have something to say about that.

And Chet was in just as bad a fix, for Boxton Military Academy had been his dream even as Three Towers Hall had been Billie's. Oh, if only they could all go what a wonderful time they could have! Oh, well——

And Mr. and Mrs. Bradley, sensing something of all this, were very unhappy and cast about desperately for some way to give their boy and girl the advantages that the others would have. But money was very tight. Mr. Bradley had all his cash tied up in several real estate transactions.

So for a little while the Bradleys were not a happy family—although they tried bravely not to show it, even to each other.

Then one morning came a long, businesslike envelope, with a typewritten address, that caused a stir in the family circle.

Mrs. Bradley opened it with a puzzled frown between her brows, then uttered a startled exclamation.

"What is it, dear?" asked Mr. Bradley, while Billie and Chet crowded closer to her chair.

"Aunt Beatrice Powerson is dead," Mrs. Bradley announced with a look more of shocked surprise than of grief. "She died in Canada quite suddenly, and this is from her attorney asking us," she looked across at her husband, "to be present at the reading of the will."

"Well, well," said Mr. Bradley slowly, "poor Beatrice Powerson dead at last. I suppose she got as much out of life as any of us, though, in her eccentric way."

"It was strange," remarked Billie slowly, "that I should have been speaking of Aunt Beatrice only the other day. Violet wanted to know if she was wealthy."

"Was she, Dad?" asked Chet, with interest.

"I imagine nobody knew," his father answered. "As you know, she was queer, and as tight as a clam when it came to talking about her personal af-

fairs. The only thing we're sure of is that she had plenty of money to travel anywhere she wanted to, and that's saying something these days."

"I say, Billie," cried Chet, his eyes shining with the thought—dear, unselfish Chet, his first hope even then was more for Billie than himself, "you are Aunt Beatrice's namesake, you know. Maybe she left you something in her will."

"Chet," his mother chided gently, "don't you think it is rather heartless to be counting on what Aunt Beatrice has left when we have just heard of her death?"

"I suppose so," said Chet, rather abashed. "But then you know we only saw her about once in every three years, and then she wasn't very friendly."

"Are you really going, Mother, you and Dad?" asked Billie, for it seemed impossible to her that her father and mother should go off on such a long journey and leave her and Chet behind. "Are you?" she asked again anxiously.

"Yes, I suppose we must," said Mrs. Bradley, looking across at her husband, who answered her with a smile.

"I don't see what else we can do," he replied, as he looked at his young daughter. "You can keep house while we're gone, Billie, just to see how you like it."

"Me keep house!" cried Billie, dismayed. "Why, I don't know the first thing about it!"

"That's the best way to learn," returned her father, while Mrs. Bradley began to smile. "Experience is the very best teacher, you know."

"That's all right, but you don't seem to realize that she will be learning at my expense," groaned Chet, adding as a horrible thought struck him: "Billie won't have to cook anything, will she?"

"Of course not," laughed Mrs. Bradley, and Chet sighed with relief. "Debbie will be here as usual to do the cooking. And, of course," she added to Billie, putting an arm about her and drawing her close, "Debbie will help you with anything you want to know. We probably won't be gone more than a week, anyway."

So it was arranged, and a couple of days later, with a wildly beating heart and a rueful smile upon her lips, Billie stood with Chet upon the station platform and waved good-bye to her father and mother.

When the train had rounded the curve and disappeared with one last challenging blast of the whistle, Billie and Chet turned to each other, feeling as lost and forlorn as the babes in the wood.

"Now, what do we do next?" breathed Billie, breaking the silence at last. "I feel helpless, Chet."

"Well, I don't think you have anything on me," admitted Chet slangily. "I suppose the most sensible thing to do would be to go home and see how Debbie is getting on with the lunch."

"Goodness, that's the first time I ever had to be

reminded that I was hungry," said Billie, and with that they laughed and felt more natural.

The rest of that day went off beautifully, and Billie was beginning to feel very confident when suddenly Debbie threw a suggestion bomb-like in the midst of her contentment.

"I hate to bother you, miss," said the black cook, approaching her mistress the next morning—Billie, by the way, was busily dusting the living-room with a very becoming dust cap perched on top of her pretty hair, "but this is mah day out."

"Your—day—out!" gasped Billie, sitting down hard on the chair she had been dusting and regarding Debbie's black face with dismay. "You never can mean that you are going to desert me, Debbie? Leave me to do all the cooking and—and—everything——" The awful vision was too much for her and her voice died down to a whisper.

"I'm tur'ble sorry, Miss Billie," said Debbie, gently but very, very firmly, "but mah young man and me we has a mos' awful impo'tant in-gagement fo' dis aft'noon, an' I couldn't break it—no'm, much as I want to." She added that last in the evident hope of appeasing her young mistress, who was still regarding her with horrified eyes.

"But, Debbie," gasped Billie when she could find her voice, "I don't know a thing in the world about cooking. Have you—have you—ordered anything?"

"Yas, indeed," Debbie assured her, going on to explain that the meal was virtually prepared anyway. "I done made a salad for you and Chet, an' the butter beans am in de pan. Dere is some stew too, which all you has to do is to warm up, Miss Billie. An' I done make a big peach pie, an' dere's some whipped cream in de 'frig'rater. So I reckons you-all won't starve to death," she added, with a broad smile that showed all her strong white teeth back to the last molar.

As for Billie, she could have hugged the mountainous black figure in the relief she felt. Why, with the dinner all prepared like this it would be just a lark to put it on the table—for just her and Chet alone.

"Debbie, you're a darling and I love you!" she cried, joyfully. "But you know you really shouldn't have scared me so—it wasn't fair."

For answer Debbie grinned again and began to get her bulky figure up the stairs, preparatory to dressing for the "in-gagement" with her "young man."

Billie watched her go, and then with a little chuckle resumed her dusting.

"I'd like to see Debbie's young man," she mused, a smile twisting the corners of her mouth. "He ought to be a giant. Anyway, I feel sorry for him if he isn't. Dear funny old Debbie—won't Chet and I have a picnic to-night?"

And as she had predicted, they did have the time of their lives. Chet refused to sit in the dining-room in lonely state, and in masterly fashion invaded the kitchen.

"Say, that smells good, Billie, old girl," and he sniffed hungrily at the stew. "Give me an apron and I'll help."

"Oh, look who wants to help," cried Billie, finding an apron nevertheless and tying it around his waist so that he looked like a butcher's assistant. "You will probably only get under my feet and bother me to death, but I suppose I'll have to humor you. There, if you must do something, set the table."

Now Chet did not want to set the table—it took him too far from the appetizing aromas in the kitchen. However, he obeyed grumblingly and was finally rewarded by being given a steaming dish of stew to carry in.

"Chet," screamed Billie, following him in and checking him just as he was in the act of putting the hot dish on the tablecloth, "put a protector under it. Don't you know," as Chet started and looked reproachfully at her, "that you are apt to ruin the table? And it's almost a brand new one at that."

"Well, you needn't scare a fellow to death," grumbled Chet. "I thought I'd stepped on the cat." But he obeyed instructions.

"My! but doesn't everything look good?" cried

Billie, sniffing hungrily. "Hurry up, Chet, take off your apron and dish up the stew while I pour the coffee. What do you know about that? *I* made the coffee. And doesn't it smell good?"

It was the jolliest of meals and finished up in royal fashion with the peach pie and whipped cream.

In a very gale of merriment Chet and Billie cleared away the dinner dishes, and then, being tired by the unusual exertion, decided to go early to bed.

For the first part of the night Billie slept soundly, but just as the clock downstairs was striking two, she awakened suddenly and lay still in bed listening. She was frightened, though she could not have told why.

Rigidly she lay there hardly daring to breath.

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE BURGLAR

WHAT was it that had awakened Billie Bradley?

Hardly had the girl asked herself that question when she heard it—a padding, stealthy, creeping noise that made her clutch the bed clothes and draw them tighter about her.

Then in a panic she realized that whatever it was had started upstairs.

Nearer, nearer came the stealthy padding, till Billie realized it had reached the landing. Her scalp crept and her hair began to stand on end. Her door was the nearest to the stairs, and she was all alone in the house with Chet!

Swiftly, she threw off the covers, jumped out of bed, and with her limbs trembling under her, ran to the door and softly turned the key in the lock.

Then she leaned weakly against the door and listened for the noise, but it had stopped. Evidently the burglar, if burglar it was, had paused to get his bearings.

Then another horrible thought struck her. Chet

was sleeping in the next room, and Chet's door was unlocked!

On feet that seemed too weak to hold her she crept into Chet's room—luckily there was a connecting door between—and softly turned the key in his door also.

Evidently she was just in time, for as she listened the stealthy noise began again and it was coming toward the very door she had just locked.

She uttered a little involuntary sound, and Chet sat up in bed with a start.

"Wh-what's up?" he demanded sleepily.

"Oh, hush," cried Billie. Scurrying to his bed and leaning over, she whispered the awful words: "There's a burglar in the house, Chet."

"A burglar?" repeated Chet, wide awake by this time. "Who says so?"

"Don't be foolish! Didn't I hear him myself?" cried Billie in a desperate whisper. "Oh, Chet, he's on the stairs outside."

"Well, why doesn't he come in? Is he bashful?" queried Chet, seeming not in the least alarmed. Billie shook him impatiently.

"He probably would have come in if I hadn't locked the doors," she told him impatiently. "For goodness' sake, Chet, wake up and tell me what to do. He may have stolen everything we own by this time."

"Hush," cried Chet, grasping her arm, and in a tense silence they listened.

Yes, they could not be mistaken—something was surely brushing against the door.

Thank heaven, she had locked it, thought Billie, as she began to feel her hair stand on end again.

Once more came that brushing sound. And then, very distinctly, a sniff!

"Oh, Chet," cried Billie, clutching her brother's arm spasmodically.

"Nervy beggar," muttered Chet. "If I had a gun I'd know what to do. But say," he added, as a happy thought struck him, "there's Dad's!" He was out of bed and across the room before Billie could do more than gasp. Fearfully she followed after.

Luckily Chet had elected to sleep in his parents' room during their absence so as to be nearer Billie, and he had happened to remember the secret hiding place that his father had shown him not long before where he kept his revolver always loaded and ready for action.

"Oh, Chet, do be careful!" whispered Billie, as Chet drew the ugly-looking thing out of the hidden drawer and examined it. "I—I think I'm more afraid of that than I am of the b-burglar."

Chet's only answer was a grim "Come on," from between set young lips. Fearfully they made their way over to the door.

Their burglar seemed to have gone on to some other room, for they could hear the stealthy padding at the other end of the hall. But now he had turned in their direction.

Very carefully Chet turned the key in the lock, and then, while Billie pressed both hands over her heart to quiet its pounding, Chet flung open the door and stepped into the hall. Billie was right at his heels.

And then the impossible thing happened. A dark shape coming slowly toward them stopped at sight of them and uttered a low bark.

Yes, the sound that issued from their supposed burglar was a very distinct and friendly canine bark.

For a minute Chet and Billie just stared speechlessly. Then slowly the revolver in Chet's hand dropped to his side and he began to laugh. It was a weak laugh at first, but it gradually swelled into a roar as he took in the full humor of the situation.

And Billie, after a moment during which she seemed undecided whether to laugh or cry, presently joined him.

"A dog!" gasped Chet, when he could get his breath. "Come here, old man, and let's have a look at you."

The dog that had caused all the disturbance came forward at Chet's command and stood looking up at them, his handsome brush waving genially.

As the light of a street lamp shining through the window fell upon him, Billie uttered an exclamation.

"Why, it's Bruce—Nellie Bane's collie," she cried. "How in the world did he ever get in? Come here, Bruce, old boy, and explain yourself."

Obediently Bruce went over to her and laid a cold muzzle in her hand, his soft eyes looking lovingly into her face. For Billie had made much of Bruce on her frequent visits to Nellie Bane, and the dog, with the instinct of his kind, had developed a great liking for her—though the first in his loyal dog's heart was Nellie Bane, his mistress.

"You're a great one!" Chet scoffed. "You get a fellow all worked up to catch a burglar, and then you produce a dog. I think you did it on purpose."

"Yes, and I suppose I scared myself half to death on purpose too," said Billie sarcastically, as she patted the dog's great head. "Where are you going?" she asked, as Chet started back into his room.

"To put this thing where I got it," he explained, holding up the pistol from which Billie shrank back. "Don't imagine we'll have any further need of it tonight."

"Wait a minute," ordered Billie, and Chet turned back surprised. "We haven't found out yet how Bruce got in," she explained, looking fearfully over her shoulder, for the effects of her fright had not quite left her yet. "Don't you think we'd better

take that along while we look through the house? We must have left a door or a window open somewhere. Bruce couldn't have come through the wall, you know."

"Something—I don't know what it can be—makes me agree with you," returned Chet sarcastically, but he turned to the stairs nevertheless. "Come on," he said. "If we have left a window open it is high time that that window was shut. Go ahead, Bruce, and show us where you got in—that's a good old boy."

At the best it was rather an eerie business—searching through the empty house at that time of night—and it was especially nerve-trying for Billie after the fright she had had.

And then they found it. The French window that opened from the dining-room upon the porch was swinging wide open—a wonderful invitation to enter for any sneak thief who might happen to pass that way.

Billie shivered again as Chet, with a final pat, put Bruce outside and closed and locked the window.

"There, I guess we won't have any more visitors to-night," he said, as they started through the dark living-room to the stairs.

"Let's hope not," returned Billie fervently.

When they reached their rooms upstairs they felt too excited for sleep, and sat for a long time talking over the incident.

They could laugh now at their surprise in meeting friendly Bruce instead of a very unfriendly house-breaker, but more than once both of them caught themselves listening for sounds in the silent house below.

"It was just luck," said Billie, as she rose at last to go to bed, "that it was Bruce that happened to find that open window instead of—of some one else!"

CHAPTER VIII

STARTLING DEVELOPMENTS

CHET and Billie were very careful to leave neither doors nor windows unlocked, and the rest of the week passed without further mishap.

Then one morning came a telegram from their parents saying that they would be home the next day.

"Goodness, now I have to get busy!" cried Billie, jumping up from the table in such a hurry that she very nearly upset Chet's coffee cup, thereby considerably surprising that boy.

"Say, do you think it's catching?" he asked, with a smile. "What's the matter with you, Billie?"

"Oh, of course you wouldn't understand—you're a boy," remarked his sister condescendingly, as she put on the becoming dust cap and pulled some gloves on her hands.

"Don't you see," she added, as Chet continued to stare at her, "that this house has to be immaculate before mother gets back? I've simply got to live up to my reputation."

"Never knew you had one," remarked Chet cruel-

ly, as he turned back to his bacon and eggs with a relieved sigh. "If you need any help," he offered graciously, as Billie swept out of the room, "just call on me."

"Thank you, I don't," called back Billie, making a face at him over her shoulder.

And then followed such a whirlwind of sweeping and dusting and throwing about of furniture that poor Chet was dismayed and was forced to take refuge on the porch.

However, when Billie, flushed and breathless and very, very pretty, took him by the arm and led him about to admire her handiwork, he told her that she was "some wonder."

"Now how about lunch?" he asked, and Billie, appetite sharpened by work, enthusiastically agreed.

It seemed an eternity to wait until the next morning, but somehow the time came at last, finding brother and sister on tip-toe with excitement.

Long before it was time to go to meet the train, they were ready and waiting. Billie was swinging back and forth in the porch swing, grasping a cushion in each hand to keep her from jumping out, while Chet walked restlessly up and down.

"If you don't sit down," said Billie so suddenly that her brother jumped, "I'll just scream."

"Well go ahead, if it will make you feel any better," invited Chet amiably. However, for the sake

of peace he seated himself in one of the broad armed chairs.

"Isn't it train time yet?" asked Billie, as she had asked many times during the last fifteen minutes.

"Here," said Chet, handing over his watch, "take this and keep looking at it. My voice is getting hoarse saying 'no.' "

"But I don't see why we can't go down to the station anyway," argued Billie.

"Only that it's about a hundred times more comfortable to wait here."

"But we might miss the train," wailed Billie, and Chet jumped to his feet with a chuckle.

"Oh, come on," he cried. "We've missed the train several times according to you. In a minute you will almost have me worried."

"You're a dear old bear," said Billie, snuggling her arm into his as they set off.

"You certainly do have a way with you, Billie, that gets you what you want," he admitted, adding meaningly: "Besides, I'm thinking I'd better keep on the right side of you just now."

"Why?" asked Billie, puzzled.

"In case Aunt Beatrice left you something. You were her namesake, remember."

Billie glanced up at him, an eager look in her eyes. But her glance fell again and she shook his arm severely.

"What's the use of raising hopes?" she said dole-

fully, as a vision of the broken "Girl Reading a Book" rose reproachfully before her and she thought longingly of how happy she could be if it were only possible to replace it.

And there was Three Towers Hall—but she shook off the thought and had opened her mouth to speak when the sharp blast of an engine whistle made them jump.

"Chet," she gasped, "it's the train! We mustn't miss it."

"We can make it if we run," said Chet, as he took hold of her arm. "Come on! No, not that way —the short cut. That's the idea."

Warm and panting they came out upon the station platform just as the train drew in. They watched the passengers eagerly, but not at first seeing those they sought, had almost decided that they were coming on a later train when away down at the end of the platform, Billie espied a familiar hat.

"There they are! Mother!" she cried, as they came within hailing distance. "We thought you weren't on the train. Oh, what a fright we had!"

After the greetings were over Chet and Billie both noticed that their parents seemed to be in a state of suppressed excitement, and both of them wondered.

However, they had too much to talk about just then to do much wondering about anything, and they walked slowly toward home, asking and answering a very flood of questions.

Mrs. Bradley wanted to know how Billie had got along without her, at which both Chet and Billie tried to tell the story of Nellie Bane's collie at the same time and in the same breath.

When they had finished Mr. Bradley chuckled, but Mrs. Bradley looked grave.

"It happened to be funny," she said. "But it might have been very serious. I hope you were careful after that."

"Were we!" they cried, and Billie added with a laugh: "We locked and double locked all the windows and doors, and if it hadn't been for Chet I would have piled furniture against the doors. But we want to know what you've been doing," she cried, turning to her mother eagerly. "Tell us, please, quick. We've been waiting so long."

Again Mr. Bradley laughed and pinched his impatient young daughter's cheek.

"I think our news can wait till we get to the house," he said.

"But *I* can't," protested Billie.

"Anybody would think you really expected to hear something," chuckled Mr. Bradley, who seemed to be enjoying himself immensely over something.

"Oh, please," begged Billie, almost beside herself with impatience by this time—and Chet, in his quiet way, was just as bad. There was something about their mother's and father's manner that told them something was in the wind.

"I'm just dying by inches," went on Billie.

But this time it was Mrs. Bradley who interrupted.

"Here we are at home, dear," she said. "Can't you give Dad and me a chance to rest, and give us perhaps a cup of tea——"

"Oh, I'm a selfish old beast!" said Billie penitently. "I might have known you would be terribly tired after that long train ride!"

And still scolding herself she hurried them before her into the house and flew to find Debbie. She had not far to go, however, for Debbie was just lumbering, like a good-natured elephant, through the hall to greet her master and mistress. As soon as the greetings were over she lumbered back again to make the necessary tea.

Billie and Chet controlled their impatience, answering the questions their mother had to ask them about all that had happened while they had been away, for Mrs. Bradley had been anxious.

When they finally left the table and Mrs. Bradley led the way back into the library, Billie uttered a long sigh of relief.

"Well," said Mrs. Bradley, and they leaned forward eagerly, "we found that what we always supposed about the amount of money Aunt Beatrice had was right. She left only a few thousand, and that —queer soul that she was—she left to a missionary society."

"Oh!" cried Billie, and it must be admitted that she both felt and looked horribly disappointed. She had not known just how much she had hoped, both for herself and for Chet, until this moment. And Chet, poor fellow, felt just as bad, although he showed it less.

"Then she didn't leave anything either to you or Dad?" Chet asked.

"No. But she did leave something to you and Billie," was Mrs. Bradley's startling announcement.

Billie and Chet looked at one another as if to be sure that they had heard aright.

"You say she left us something?" cried Billie breathlessly.

"Yes. But don't let your hopes run away with you," Mr. Bradley warned them, "for it wasn't very much."

"Oh, tell us," the two commanded eagerly and in unison.

"She left a gold watch to Chet," Mrs. Bradley told them. "It is really a very beautiful watch, Chet, and worth a good deal of money. And to Billie——" She paused for emphasis and Billie wriggled impatiently. "And to Billie she left her rambling old homestead at Cherry Corners."

"A homestead at Cherry Corners!" gasped Billie, unable to believe her ears while Chet looked interested. "What sort of a house is it, Mother?"

"I haven't been there for a number of years," re-

plied her mother, knitting her brows in an effort to recall the details of Billie's queer inheritance. "As I remember it, it is an old-fashioned rambling affair. It must have been considered rather handsome in its palmy years, and it has been in the Powerson family for generations. In fact, I believe it dates back to revolutionary days. It has great large rooms, and rather spooky, dark hallways. I'm afraid I wasn't very much impressed with it the first time I saw it," she finished, with a smile.

"Wh-what a funny thing to leave me," said Billie, her eyes big and round with wonder. Then she added, without thinking—as Billie always did: "Oh, don't I wish she had left me a hundred dollars instead! It would have been much more useful!"

CHAPTER IX

GHOSTS AND THINGS

BILLIE was instantly sorry for her speech, as she saw the old troubled expression cross her father's face.

"Forgive me, please!" she pleaded. "I think I must be the most ungrateful girl alive."

"Well, I should say so!" cried Chet, to whom the description of the queer old house, while dismaying his sister, had appealed immensely. "Say, I'd like nothing better than to go out right now and look your property over, Billie. Big rooms and spooky halls and—say, Mother, it must have a cellar and an attic. What are they like?"

"I suppose," said his mother, smiling at his enthusiasm, "that since you seem to like the ghostly part, you would be more than ever pleased with the attic and cellar.

"As I remember it, the cellar was the most peculiar part of the whole queer place. Aunt Beatrice took me through it, and seemed immensely proud of the funny old tunnels and store-rooms that were tucked away in all sort of odd corners. The

only thing I liked about it," she finished, with a reminiscent smile, "was the shelf-lined, icy room where she kept her fruit preserves."

"This gets better and better!" fairly crowed Chet. "A damp, gloomy old cellar with tunnels and storerooms in queer corners and—— But you were going to tell us about the attic."

"Yes, the attic!" cried Billie, for by this time Chet had made her as much interested in her strange inheritance as he was. "Did it have trunks in it, Mother—and cobwebs?"

"Trunks, yes, but not cobwebs," smiled her mother, "for Aunt Beatrice was an excellent housekeeper—when she was at home."

"Then the attic wasn't spooky?" queried Chet, disappointed.

"I should say it was!" returned his mother, with an emphasis that set all his fears at rest. "It was the creepiest place I have ever been in, and I was never gladder in my life than when we left it for the more cheerful lower floor—though goodness knows that was dreary enough."

"Say, when are we going?" cried Chet, jumping to his feet, his face flushed with eagerness.

"Where?" asked Mrs. Bradley.

"To Cherry Corners, of course," answered Chet in a tone which very plainly meant, "why ask such a foolish question?" "To the ghosts that inhabit the garret and cellar of Billie's new house."

"Hold on, hold on there!" cried Mr. Bradley, who had been listening to the proceedings in amused silence. "Do you happen to know how far Cherry Corners is from here?"

"Very far?" asked Billie.

"A whole day's ride, that's all," their father answered.

"Say, Dad," cried Chet suddenly. "What do you suppose the old place is worth?"

"I can't say, Chet," answered Mr. Bradley. "Being so far from good roads and the railroad, I am afraid the land is not worth much."

"But it must be worth something," persisted the boy.

Mr. Bradley smiled faintly.

"For Billie's sake let us hope so. But you must remember, in this state there are thousands of abandoned farms. Folks simply can't make a living on them, and so they move away."

"But the buildings must be worth something."

"To live in, yes, but that is all. You can't move an old stone house to some other spot."

"Why do they call it 'Cherry Corners?'" asked Billie, for she had been following a little train of thought all her own. "It's a very queer name."

"Oh, they come by it naturally enough," her mother answered. "It is surrounded by a grove of cherry trees and is near a crossing of two rocky

roads. So you see the reason for 'Cherry Corners.'"

"Goodness, that sounds as if it were away off in the wilderness!" cried Billie, adding: "But wouldn't it be awful to have to live in that spooky old house all alone? Are there any houses near it, Mother?"

"Not one for more than a mile," said Mrs. Bradley. "They are almost as isolated now as they used to be in the old Indian days."

"Indians!" cried Chet, pricking up his ears again. "Did you say something about Indians, Mother?"

"Why, I've heard Aunt Beatrice say," answered Mrs. Bradley, beginning to share in her children's enthusiasm, "that the Powersons who originally built the house built it especially for the purpose of resisting Indian attacks. Now that I come to think of it," she added, her eyes beginning to shine with excitement, "that was the reason for the winding tunnels and secret rooms. As the last resort, the family could take refuge in them."

"Oh, boy!" cried Chet, springing to his feet for the second time. "Did you hear that, did you? Indian raids and—oh, gosh!" Words failed him and he sank back in his chair with a sigh of joy.

"Isn't it wonderful!" breathed Billie. "At first I was disappointed but now—— Is that all she left, Mother?"

"Isn't that enough?" her father interjected, with a laugh.

"I suppose so, but I thought——"

"Why, yes, that was all," said her mother, adding the next moment, surprised that she should have forgotten the most important part of all: "Oh, I forgot to tell you—Aunt Beatrice left you the house with all its contents."

"Oh!" breathed Billie again. "Now I know we're going to have a wonderful time!"

"What does the old house contain?" questioned Chet. His mind was on getting some money out of the inheritance for Billie.

"I am sure I do not know," answered his mother. "It may be completely furnished or it may be quite bare. I imagine, though, that Aunt Beatrice left it furnished. But everything is very old, and maybe the rats and moths have played sad havoc there."

They talked for a little while more about this strange thing that had happened. Then Mr. Bradley went off to pick up the loose ends of his business and Mrs. Bradley adjourned to the kitchen to discuss supper preparations with the mountainous Debbie.

Left alone, Billie and Chet looked at each other wonderingly.

"Well," said Billie in a slightly awed tone, "we expected something to happen, and it certainly did."

"But we didn't expect her to leave you an old stone mansion," crowed Chet. "Say, Billie," he added, stopping before her in his excited pacing of

the room to gaze at her eagerly, "aren't you crazy to go out and see it?"

"I'd like," said Billie fervently, "to start for Cherry Corners on the very next train. But I'm not so sure I'd like to stay in that place after nightfall," she added on second thought.

"Why, you're not afraid of the ghosts, are you?" he asked, with intense scorn. "Don't you know that ghosts are all in the imagination?"

"Of course I do. Who said I was afraid of ghosts?" retorted Billie with spirit. "You know that I don't believe in them any more than you do."

"Well, then what are you afraid of?" insisted Chet.

"Oh, thieves and things. Tramps maybe," said Billie thoughtfully; then she added with spirit, as Chet smiled a superior sort of smile: "I just guess you wouldn't be able to spend a night in that sort of a gloomy old house away off from everybody without feeling nervous. Goodness! I'd be expecting every minute to have the ghosts of dead and gone Indians rise up and scalp me."

"Thought you didn't believe in ghosts," gibed Chet.

"I don't," flared Billie, adding rather weakly: "But I'm not going to take any chances, anyway.

"But oh," she added after a few minutes of thoughtful silence, "I can't help it if it is ungrateful, but I do wish Aunt Beatrice had left me a few hun-

dred dollars instead. We've still got that old statue to worry about, and Three Towers Hall and the military academy."

Chet was silent for a minute, then he said with sudden inspiration: "There's the watch Aunt Beatrice left me, you know. Mother said it was very valuable."

Billie's face lighted for a moment, then fell again.

"But you know Uncle Bill always said that you never could get anything like the value for old gold. And anyway," she rose and put a loving arm about him, "I couldn't let you do that for me, Chet, dear. I think you're the dearest brother in the world."

A few hours later Laura Jordon and Violet Farrington came over, trying their best not to look curious. They had waited as long as they could, but knowing about the death of Billie's queer old aunt and knowing also that Billie, as her namesake, might expect some share of the fortune—if there was one —they had been filled with excitement, and now as they ran up the steps to Billie's porch it was all they could do to keep from blurting out the question.

For both Laura and Violet had been perfectly certain that Billie's Aunt Beatrice had been some sort of miser who had piled up an immense fortune simply for their chum's benefit.

"Just think," Violet had said in one of their excited conferences on the subject, "what a won-

derful thing it will be for Billie just now when she is so worried about that miserable old statue. And for Chet too!"

"Yes, it would mean they could both go to school and we'd all have such a good time," Laura had chimed in. "Goodness!" she had added with a chuckle, "I feel almost as much obliged to Aunt Beatrice as Billie will."

But now that the great moment had come, they sat decorously in Billie's porch swing and tried to appear not at all curious as to whether Billie had gathered in a fortune since they last had seen her or not.

And Billie, her little imp of mischief at work again, guessed the object of their visit and decided with an inward chuckle to keep them guessing.

She managed to accomplish her purpose for just about five minutes. Then Laura, unable to stand the suspense a moment more, took the bit in her teeth and bolted.

"For goodness' sake, Billie," she cried desperately, "why don't you tell us?"

"Tell you what?" asked Billie, trying to look innocent. "Haven't I been telling you——"

"Yes, about the way Debbie makes potato salad," cried Laura disgustedly. "You know well enough why we came."

"Why you came?" Billie repeated, looking still

more surprised. "Why, naturally, I thought you came to see me."

"Billie Bradley, if you don't tell us what we want to know this instant," cried Laura, jumping to her feet and making a threatening movement toward Billie's mischievous head, "I'll—I'll—oh, I don't know what I'll do. Are you going to be good? Are you?"

"Yes, yes," cried Billie, pretending immense fright, while her eyes danced with mischief. "Tell me what it is you want to know and I'll do my best, Your Highness," this last in such a very humble tone that Laura chuckled.

"All right, go ahead then," she said while Violet leaned forward eagerly. "What did your aunt leave you?"

"Straight from the shoulder," Billie murmured. Then as Laura made another threatening gesture toward her, added hurriedly: "All right. Don't shoot and I'll tell you everything. Only it will take time."

Billie paused, to allow the proper amount of emphasis, then said, in a deep whisper:

"She left me a—haunted house!"

CHAPTER X

OLD FURNITURE

Laura screamed and Violet jumped clear out of her seat.

They stared at Billie, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Wh-what did you say?" asked Laura when she could get her breath.

"I said," said Billie, speaking very distinctly and enjoying the sensation she had caused, "that Aunt Beatrice left me a haunted house."

"Th-then I wasn't dreaming," stammered Violet, while Laura just continued to stare. "Is th-that all, Billie?"

"Isn't that enough?" asked Billie, just as her father had done a few hours before.

"It's either not enough or it is too much," replied Violet. "If I had to have the ghosts, I should want some very substantial compensations to make up for such housemates as those airy and playful ladies and gentlemen are said to make."

"But it is a house," persisted Billie. "And you

know it isn't everybody who can own a haunted house."

"A haunted house!" said Laura, speaking in a hushed tone. "Is it a real haunted house, Billie, or are you fooling?"

"Well, I don't know that it is a regular honest-to-goodness one," admitted Billie reluctantly. "You see, it is the house Aunt Beatrice used to live in when she was at home, and she left it to me, with everything in it."

"How perfectly glorious!" cried Laura, clapping her hands with delight. "Tell us about it, Billie. What made you say it was haunted?"

Then did Billie tell them all that her mother had told her about her inheritance and, if the truth be told, even added a few details of her own.

However that may have been, the fact remains that when she had finished the girls were as perfectly wild as Chet had been to visit the queer old place and, if need be, even confront its "ghosts!"

"Think!" cried Laura, clasping her hands rapturously. "Just think of being able to roam all over that romantic old place and pry into corners——"

"And get your hands dirty," interrupted Billie drily.

"Why, Billie," Laura stopped in her transports to regard her friend with wide eyes, "aren't you simply wild about the place too?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Billie, adding as a shadow

crossed her face: "The folks think I'm awful, all 'cept Chet, and I suppose I am—but I'd give the whole place, tunnels, spooky hallways, ghostly attic, and everything for just a few little hundred dollar bills."

The girls were silent for a few minutes, realizing that Billie's strange inheritance did not do a thing toward solving the old problems of the broken statue and of going to boarding school.

Then Violet, who was always thinking up some happy way out of a difficulty, gave a little bounce in the swing.

"How do we know," she cried, as the girls looked at her half hopefully, "but what you could sell some of the furniture in the old house and get enough to pay for the statue?"

"We might, at that," said Billie, her face lighting up again. "But mother said it must all be awfully old," she added doubtfully.

"All the better," cried Violet, growing more and more enthusiastic. "You say that the old house dates back to revolutionary times, Billie. How do we know but what some of the old furniture would be very valuable as antiques?"

"Violet, you're a wonder!" cried Billie, hugging her so hard that she gasped for breath. "I'd never have thought of that in a thousand years. Now you speak of it," she added thoughtfully, "I remember some antique furniture that Uncle Bill has in his

library. He says it's worth all sorts of money, but I wouldn't give two cents for it."

"Well, as long as somebody will, what should we care!" cried Laura flippantly. "Maybe you'll make a fortune for yourself after all, Billie."

"Oh, and think what it would mean!" cried Violet, her eyes shining. "It would mean that you could pay for that beastly old statue, Billie. And it would mean that you could go to Three Towers with us."

"And Chet could go to the military academy with Teddy and Ferd," Laura added.

"For goodness' sake!" cried poor Billie wildly. "You make me feel dizzy. What is the use of getting my hopes all raised? Probably Aunt Beatrice's furniture will be old, fallen-to-pieces stuff that nobody would give two cents for."

"Goodness, what a wet blanket!" cried Laura reproachfully.

"Well, I'd rather be a wet blanket," retorted Billie desperately, "than to plan for a lot of fun and then be disappointed. I—I've been disappointed enough, goodness knows."

There was a quiver in Billie's brave little mouth and instinctively Violet and Laura put an arm about her.

"We know what you mean," said Violet, soothingly. "And if you don't want us to, we'll try not to hope too hard."

"Or if we do, we'll keep it to ourselves," added Laura, and Billie hugged them fondly.

"I don't want you to stop hoping," she cried plaintively. "And I don't want to be a wet blanket, either. I'm just afraid, that's all."

The girls swung back and forth in silence for a few minutes. Then it was Laura who spoke.

"When are you going out to look over your property, Billie?"

"Why, I don't know," answered Billie thoughtfully. "As soon as we can arrange it, I suppose. Dad says it's a full day's trip to get there, so we would have to make some arrangement to stay over night."

"Couldn't you spend the night in the house?" suggested Violet.

"We might," Billie answered doubtfully. "Although I must say I wouldn't like to—not the first night anyway. I'd want time to become acquainted with the place first."

"If you will promise on your word of honor not to laugh at me," said Violet after another short silence, "I'll tell you that I have another idea."

"We won't laugh," they promised, and Billie added eagerly: "Tell us about it, Violet. Even if we do laugh at your ideas at first, we generally end by following them."

"But you said you wouldn't laugh this time," Violet reminded her, adding, as the worst threat

she could think of: "If you do I won't let you follow out my idea."

"All right," said Billie. "As Chet would say—'shoot.'"

"Why, I was just thinking," said Violet, looking at them intently, "that we haven't a plan in the world for spending our vacation——"

"Vi!" cried Laura joyfully, not waiting for her to finish, "you *have* a good idea this time. You were going to say, why not spend our vacation there?"

"At Cherry Corners?" asked Billie surprised, adding with a demure glance: "Nobody seems to think of asking me about it. And it's my property, you know."

"Gracious, isn't she stuck up?" cried Laura flippantly. "I'll have you know you're not the only property holder in the community, Billie Bradley. Dad gave me the deed to three lots in some outlandish place, I don't even know where it is."

"Probably didn't have anything else to do with them, so wished them on you," said Billie cruelly.

"Shouldn't wonder," said Laura, adding with a rueful little smile: "I've never been able to find out whether it was an April Fool's present or not."

"Well, I don't see what all that has to do with my proposition," put in Violet patiently. "Now own up—don't you think it's a great idea?"

"Wonderful," said Billie unenthusiastically. "I

don't know when I've ever heard of anything so brilliant."

"There's something wrong with Billie," said Violet, beginning to look anxious. "Don't you think we'd better send for a doctor, Laura?"

"I think you are the one who needs a doctor," retorted Billie. "Who ever thought of spending a vacation out in the wilderness a million miles or so from nowhere in an old tumbled-down house that makes your flesh creep and the hair rise on your head just to look at it?"

"My, but that must feel funny," said Laura, the irrepressible. "That's one experience I never did have."

"What?" asked Billie.

"Have my hair rise on my head. Please excuse me, Billie," as Billie in her turn looked threatening. "What was it you were about to say?"

"Goose," commented Billie and then turned to Violet. "Did you really mean that about spending our vacation there?" she asked.

"Of course I did," said Violet. "And I don't see what's so very funny about it anyway. We could take a chaperone, and maybe the boys could come along too."

"Oh, that would be fun," cried Billie, then flushed as she met Laura's laughing eyes. "I meant," she added, angry because of the blush, "that the place

wouldn't be quite so lonesome and horrid with the boys around."

"Oh, yes, we know," said Laura, with an aggravating twinkle that made Billie long to shake her. "We know all about it, honey."

Why, thought Billie, as she ignored the remark, pretending not to hear it, would Laura always be such a goose as to make a joke of the very real friendship between her and Teddy Jordon? She liked Teddy immensely and she was not going to stop liking him even if Laura would persist in being foolish.

"Then you will admit it is a good idea?" Violet asked eagerly.

"I liked it all, but Billie only likes the last part—about the boys," said Laura, and again Billie had a wild desire to shake her.

"It will be lots of fun," she said, beginning to see the possibilities in a vacation spent at Cherry Corners. "Mother says the rooms are large and there are plenty of them so we could have as big a party as we wanted. But I don't know how comfortable you would be," she warned them.

"Who cares about being comfortable on a lark like that?" cried Laura airily. "The more uncomfortable we are the more fun we'll have. I say, Billie, don't you think we'd better take Gyp along?" Gyp was a thoroughbred bull terrier of which Laura

was the proud owner. "He might come in handy if any ghosts showed up."

The girls laughed at her.

"As if Gyp would be any good against ghosts!" scoffed Violet. "Why, they would walk right through him."

"Well," said Laura, with a little chuckle, "he could at least bark and let us know when they were coming!"

CHAPTER XI

BILLIE WINS OUT

"But whom shall we get for a chaperone?" asked Laura Jordon, after they had thoroughly discussed these new and startling plans for a vacation. "We don't want to get any one who is too old and grouchy, and yet the folks probably wouldn't let us go unless we did."

Billie and Violet laughed, for they realized the truth of what she said.

"We do seem to be 'up against it,' as Ted says." Laura was always using her brother for an excuse for her own slang. "I can't think of a single person jolly enough to please us and dull enough to please the folks."

"How about one of our mothers?" Violet suggested.

"I know my mother wouldn't do it," said Billie. "The last time I asked her to chaperone us girls she said she would as soon chaperone a trio of eels."

"And when I asked mother," Laura added, "she said she would have nervous prostration in a week."

"My, we must have a terrible reputation," sighed

Violet. "I never knew we were as bad as all that."

"Oh, I have an idea!" cried Laura suddenly, clapping her hands.

"Well, don't let it bite you," murmured Billie.

"Wait till you hear and you won't be so sarcastic," retorted Laura. "I'm sure I have just the very person that we want."

"Oh, who?" cried Violet.

"Maria Gilligan, our housekeeper," Laura announced, and then sat back with an air that said just as plainly as words: "There! how's that for an inspiration?"

"Maria Gilligan, your housekeeper?" Billie repeated.

"I think it's a rather good idea, Laura," said Violet. "Isn't Mrs. Gilligan the one who is always playing jokes on her husband?"

"Yes, she's the funniest thing you ever saw," Laura answered, her eyes beginning to twinkle at the memory of some of Mrs. Gilligan's escapades. "Why, one April Fool's Day she set the clock back an hour and Mr. Gilligan got up grumbling that it was awfully dark for six o'clock. Then when he was all ready and was starting out to work she told him about it."

"What did he do?" asked Violet, interested.

"I know what I'd have done if I'd been in his place," sniffed Billie. "I'd have tied her in a chair and gagged her and left her there all day."

"Billie! how barbaric!" cried Violet. "What would you have done that for?"

"Just so she could have thought over her sins," said Billie with a chuckle. "I never did believe in practical jokes."

"And then another time," said Laura, her eyes twinkling, "she was upstairs straightening up the store-room when she pretended to have a tumble. You know she weighs about two hundred pounds——"

"At a rough guess, I should say three hundred," murmured Billie, for Billie was in a very contrary mood that day.

"And she came down with a thump that shook the chandeliers," Laura went on, ignoring the interruption, "and when Mr. Gilligan—you know he weighs only a hundred and fifty and is about half her size——"

"Now I *know* she weighs three hundred," interposed Billie again. "It's just a matter of arithmetic."

"There she was with her head in her hands," went on Laura, too much amused by her story to notice the interruption, "sobbing as if her heart would break. And when he got down on his knees to comfort her, she just looked at him with a grin and said: 'April Fool.'"

"Well, I should say he was," said Billie, with another sniff. "And not only an April Fool, either.

She would try a trick like that just about once with me."

"Well, anyway," Laura concluded, "I think she would be just the one to take on our trip with us. She's jolly and full of fun and yet she's old enough and fat enough to please our fathers and mothers. What do you say?"

"Do you suppose she's fat enough to scare away the ghosts?" asked Billie, with a chuckle.

"My, but I'd be sorry for any mistaken ghost that tried to have a set-to with her," laughed Laura. "She'd just laugh at them and say: 'Shoo, ghost, don't bodder me.' "

"All right, let's ask her," decided Billie. "Now that we have made up our minds to change Cherry Corners into a summer resort, I can't wait to get started."

"If only the folks will be willing," said Violet, looking worried. "Mother is funny about letting me go anywhere away from home without her."

"I guess all our parents are," said Billie, then added, with a sudden inspiration: "I tell you what! Let's all go together and ask them. Three are always stronger than one."

"You do have a good idea once in awhile, Billie!" exclaimed Laura, jumping out of the swing and holding out a hand to each of them. "Come on, we can't afford to waste any time."

"Where shall we go first?" asked Violet.

"To Laura's," Billie decided. "If we can get her mother and father to consent and then can get Mrs. Gilligan to go with us as chaperone, we'll have a pretty good argument to give our folks. Eh, what?"

Gaily the girls set off to win Laura's parents over to their side, and they were lucky enough to find Mrs. Jordon at home. Also Teddy was there, sitting beside her on the veranda. At sight of Billie the boy jumped to his feet and came running down to her.

"Hello," he cried. "I was just coming over your way, to see if Chet didn't want to fight out our singles tournament. He's two sets ahead of me now, and I'm thristing for r-revenge."

"I think he'll give it to you all right," laughed Billie, as Violet and Laura ran up the steps in front of them. "I've never seen the time yet when Chet refused a tennis game."

"All right, I'm off then," he cried, and was starting away when she called him back.

"Don't you want to know about my—inheritance?" she asked him, with a demure little glance.

"Your what?" he cried, then suddenly he grasped her two hands and swung them joyfully back and forth. "Do you mean to say," he cried, "that your aunt really left you something? What is it, Billie? Go on, tell me."

"If you want to hear all about it just stay around

for a little while," she laughed, leading him toward the group at the other end of the porch, two members of which were already in animated conversation.

"May we get in on this?" she called, interrupting an eloquent appeal on Laura's part.

"Oh, yes, come here, do," cried Laura, clutching at her dress and dragging her into the circle. "Mother's beginning to shake her head, and you mustn't let her, Billie. She'll do anything for you."

Mrs. Jordon laughed and made room for Billie on the divan beside her.

"Now perhaps you'll tell me," she said, "what this crazy daughter of mine is talking about. So far I've got a sort of confused jumble of a haunted house and vacations and Mrs. Gilligan. I must confess I don't see how the three can possibly be connected."

Then Billie told all over again the story of her strange inheritance, while Mrs. Jordon and Teddy listened with interest and Violet and Laura now and then put in a word to plead their cause.

As for Teddy, he was so busy watching Billie's flushed, excited and altogether charming face that he more than once lost the trend of the conversation.

"I don't wonder Laura said mother couldn't refuse her anything," he thought. "I don't see how

any one could refuse her when she talks and looks that way. Billie's a wonder, that's all."

And in this case Billie did indeed prove herself to be a wonder. Within half an hour she had not only won Mrs. Jordon over to their side, but had persuaded her to let the girls borrow Mrs. Gilligan for the time of their vacation.

"Of course," Mrs. Jordon warned them, as the girls were hugging each other triumphantly, "we aren't at all sure that Mrs. Gilligan will want to undertake such an expedition. I couldn't blame her very much if she didn't," she added, with a rueful little smile, "knowing you girls as she does."

"I'll get her!" cried Laura, and promptly put her words into action.

She appeared the next minute, dragging a very much astonished housekeeper after her, and proudly presented her prize to her mother.

"She said she was busy, Mother, and couldn't stop," Laura said, adding, with a bright smile: "But I told her it was something awfully important you wanted to say to her."

"Sure and I suppose the young girl is up to some of her tricks," said Mrs. Gilligan, beaming fondly upon her captor, "but I came with her, thinking it possible you might really have something to say to me, Mrs. Jordon."

"Yes, I have, Mrs. Gilligan. Sit down, won't you

please? It may take some time to persuade you——"

And then and there began another campaign. However, with Mrs. Jordon as a powerful ally the girls had little trouble in overcoming Mrs. Gilligan's objections, and in the end came off with colors flying.

"Now to see Billie's mother!" cried Laura.

The girls hugged Mrs. Jordon, waved to their new chaperone, and ran gayly down the steps. Teddy, with a whispered word to his mother, followed them.

"Say, wait for a fellow, can't you?" he cried, and they turned to wait for him.

"Come on, Vi," cried Laura, catching hold of Violet's arm and hurrying forward. "Ted and Billie will get there some time. We can't wait for them."

"How do you like our new plans?" asked Billie, looking up at him with sparkling eyes.

"I think you ought to have all sorts of fun," he told her, adding with a funny little smile: "But I can't quite make out yet where we fellows come in."

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" she asked, surprised. "Why, you are going with us!"

CHAPTER XII

GREAT PLANS

After permission for the outing was gained from all the parents concerned everything was bustle and excitement. For a week the girls spent the whole of every day at each other's houses, planning their vacation, talking about the clothes they would need to take with them, and generally enjoying themselves.

As the time drew near they could hardly contain their excitement, and the boys, who had decided they would follow the girls some days later, were almost as bad.

"I don't see why you don't come with us," Billie pouted one night, when the entire crowd of young folks had assembled at her home. "It would be lots more fun on the train if you boys were with us."

"But there is the tennis match we promised to play with the fellows of the south end," Chet pointed out for perhaps the hundredth time. "We couldn't back out of it at the last minute, you know; they'd think we were afraid."

"Now how do you know," Violet pointed out,

"but what we will all have been eaten up by the ghosts by the time you get there?"

"Ghosts!" scoffed Ferdinand Stowing, who was to go with Chet and Teddy. "I don't see where you girls get this ghost stuff. Just because a house happens to be old doesn't say it's haunted."

"Gosh! listen to him," cried Chet indignantly. "Some one is always taking the joy out of life."

"Say, you don't think it's haunted, do you?" asked Ferd, in surprise.

"Of course not," answered Chet, adding, with a chuckle: "But I have my hopes."

"Well, so have I," spoke up Laura promptly. "If there isn't a family ghost or two about the place, we just won't have any fun. What's the use of going off into the wilderness to a spooky house if we're not going to meet a ghost?"

"Well, you know I didn't promise any ghosts," said Billie, looking up from a piece of fancy work she was embroidering. "If you are disappointed, you needn't blame it on me, Laura, or you either, Chet."

"Well, I don't see why we shouldn't have a good time without ghosts," put in Violet. "In fact, I don't think I'd particularly enjoy meeting somebody's great-great-ancestor in the dark."

"Oh, Vi, you give me the creeps," said Laura with a little shiver. "Billie, do you think half a

dozen middies would do? We won't want to dress up very much."

"No, the ghosts probably wouldn't know the difference," said Teddy wickedly. "By the way, boys," he went on, imitating Laura's tone to perfection, "that's one important thing we haven't decided, yet. What are we going to wear?"

"You poor fish!" cried Ferd, throwing a cushion at him. "Who let you in?"

"Stop wrecking the furniture," exclaimed Billie, from her corner. "And do stop talking all at once. You make my ears ache. And besides, I want to say something."

"Silence," cried Chet, in a dramatically deep voice. "The queen is about to speak."

"He said something that time," whispered Teddy in her ear, and a little pink flush mounted to Billie's face, making her look prettier than ever. It was so nice to have one's friends like you!

"Why, I was just thinking about the cooking," she said. "Do any of you boys know how to cook?"

"Heavens, listen at her!" cried Ferd in alarm. "Is she going to set us to work already—before we get there? What's the idea, Billie?"

"Well," replied Billie, biting off her thread calmly, "we have to eat while we're there, you know."

"No!" cried Chet sarcastically. "You may, sweet sister, but not us. We are too ethereal."

"Say, is he insulting us?" cried Ferd indignantly. "Say that again, I dare you——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake keep still!" cried Laura, clapping her hands to her ears. "You make me deaf, dumb and blind. Now, Billie, what were you going to say?"

"Simply, that since we do have to eat, Chet or anybody else to the contrary," she looked at her brother and dimpled adorably, "we will have to decide who is going to do the cooking."

"Why, I suppose we'll take our turns at it, as we've done before when we have been camping," said Laura, in surprise.

"I know. But what I want to find out is, are the boys going to do any of the work?"

"Good land, is she asking us to cook?" asked Ferd. "Why, Billie, we don't know a thing about it!"

"And don't want to learn," added Chet fervently.

"Oh, you big fibbers!" Billie's eyes danced as she looked at them. "I remember—oh, I have a very good memory," and she glanced sideways at Teddy, who was beginning to look uncomfortable. "I remember a certain person telling me how beautifully you boys cooked while you were at camp."

"Say, Billie, that's not fair," cried Teddy, with a guilty note in his voice that made his two comrades look at him accusingly.

"Aha, we see the villain!" cried Ferd threateningly. "What'll we do with him, Chet?"

"Nothing's bad enough for such a crime," said Chet ruefully. "What did you make such a break for, Ted? I thought I'd brought you up better."

"Gee, Billie, do you see what you've let me in for?" said Ted miserably, but Billie only regarded him with laughing eyes while Laura and Violet seemed to be enjoying the situation immensely.

"I don't see what I did," Billie replied innocently. "I thought I was paying you boys a compliment by saying that you could cook well."

"But we can't," cried Ferd, seizing the opportunity eagerly. "Gee, Billie, you couldn't eat the awful messes we make. Why, you're a good cook——"

Billie raised a cushion threateningly in the air.

"None of that! None of that!" she warned him. "We see through you, villain!"

"Say, she must think you're one of the Cherry Corners ghosts," broke in Teddy whimsically. "It's pretty hard on a fellow when you can see through him, Billie."

"But honest you couldn't," Ferd insisted, not to be defeated in this one last hope. "Really, I don't know enough about an egg to take the shell off when I fry it."

"Idiot," cried Billie, throwing the pillow at him in earnest. "Who ever heard of fried egg in the shell?"

"I did," cried Ferd, unabashed by the laughter and the scornful glances turned his way. "Ladies

and gentlemen, you see before you to-night the man that invented it."

"Well, but nobody has answered my question," said Billie demurely, after the laughter had subsided. "Are the boys going to help cook or are they not?"

"I tell you what," said Chet desperately. "We'll cook if you will promise to eat it."

"Billie," cried Laura in alarm, "don't make any rash promises. They would probably put some awful thing into the food on purpose."

"Laura, that's some idea," cried Ferd, looking at her admiringly while Teddy and Chet chuckled. "Thanks. We never would have thought of that ourselves."

"Well," said Billie with a little chuckle, "I imagine we would rather eat our own cooking anyway, so you needn't worry. Only," she added warningly, as they sighed with relief, "there is one thing you *will* have to do."

"And what's that?" they cried fearfully.

"Help wash the dishes," she said; and in her tone was no relenting.

And so, even to the impatient girls the time passed quickly until at last the great day arrived.

It was a wonderful day, sunshiny and warm without being too hot, and all three of them were up with the birds. They were to catch the eight o'clock

morning train, and so they had no time to waste in bed.

Billie was in a joyful mood as she got herself into the pretty new dress she was to wear on the trip. She ran around the room, humming to herself and every once in a while doing a little dance step as she realized that they were at last to embark upon their adventure.

And an adventure she somehow felt sure it was to be. For even though, contrary to Chet's hopes, and she smiled as she thought of him, they did not meet with ghosts at Cherry Corners, there would be the fun of seeing for the first time her inheritance.

It might be a queer old house and the contents and the grounds about it might be of small value, but there was a wonderful thrill nevertheless in being the owner of it.

And there was the fact that it dated back to revolutionary times, it was really historic and—it all belonged to her!

No wonder she sang as she gave a last fond pat to the pretty dress and tucked a wandering little strand of hair into place. Her eyes danced and her face was flushed, but Billie never noticed how pretty she was.

She was the first in the dining-room that morning, but her mother soon came in, scattering advice as she came and all through the meal Billie tried hard to listen dutifully to all the "must nots" and

"don't dos." But all the time her eyes were on the clock and her mind was saying over and over again:

"In just half an hour we'll be on the train. In just half an hour we'll be on the train."

Then Chet came in and her father, and, finding that it was almost train time, postponed their breakfast to see her off. A few minutes later they started off to pick up the girls on the way to the station.

They found them waiting impatiently, and wildly eager to be off. About a block from the station they heard the whistle of the train, and the girls would run for it, though they really had plenty of time.

At last they were in the train with the boys and their parents waving to them. Then suddenly they realized that they were moving. They were actually on their way!

"Give my regards to the ghosts!" cried Chet as the train moved off, "and don't scare them all off before I get there!"

CHAPTER XIII

CHERRY CORNERS

As the train drew out of the station Billie leaned back with a sigh of pure happiness.

"You know," she said, looking at the girls with sparkling eyes, "this is the very first time that I have ever been away from North Bend without the folks."

"But don't forget you've got me to look after you," put in Mrs. Gilligan, with a twinkle in her eyes. "I'm goin' to see that you don't get into mischief."

"I don't know but what we shall have to look out that you don't get into mischief," said Laura with a chuckle. "Mr. Gilligan told me once that you weren't to be trusted out alone."

"Huh," retorted Mrs. Gilligan good-naturedly, "it's him that I wouldn't be trusting. But what," she asked, looking curiously at Billie, "did your brother mean by saying not to scare away the ghosts before he gets there?"

"Oh," laughed Billie, "he has a sort of idea that the house at Cherry Corners is inhabited by spirits

—just because mother said that the halls and rooms were spooky. He will be terribly disappointed if he doesn't see half a dozen ghosts."

"Well, I wouldn't," said Violet with a shudder, for now that they were on the way to their adventure, her courage was beginning to fail.

"Ghosts!" repeated Mrs. Gilligan, with a fun-loving light in her eyes. "Better not any ghosts come around me or I'll give 'em a taste of the rolling pin."

The girls laughed. The picture of Mrs. Maria Gilligan assaulting a ghost with a rolling pin was indeed a funny one.

"Well," said Billie a little later, as she started to unpin her hat, "I don't know about you girls, but I'm going to be comfortable. We have a long ride before us."

"I suppose we might as well take off our hats and stay awhile," agreed Laura, following suit. "Say, girls," she added, as she stuck her hat up in the rack above her head, "I just thought of something last night."

"Was it anything important?" asked Billie, with a wicked little look.

"I don't know whether you would think so," Laura retorted calmly. "I was wondering why we didn't take the night train that reaches Roland, the nearest station to Cherry Corners, in the morning."

"That would have been a good idea, wouldn't it?"

said Billie. "Now we will reach the house after dark."

"When all the spooks are roaming," added Laura, in a ghostly voice.

"Goodness!" cried Violet, turning uncomfortably in her seat, "if you girls don't stop talking about ghosts I'll just get out and go home."

"Got your car fare?" asked Laura.

"No. But I could always walk," returned Violet. "And I'd almost rather do it than spend the night in the company of ghosts."

"Well, you'd better decide in a hurry," said Billie, with a chuckle, "because the longer you take to make up your mind, the farther you will have to walk back."

"All right," said Violet, suddenly goaded into an unusual firmness. "You promise me this minute that you won't say another word about ghosts until we get there, or I'll get off at the very next station and walk back."

"It's ten miles," Laura warned her.

"I don't care if it's twenty," she returned stoutly, and laughingly the girls promised.

"It would be a crime to wear out those perfectly good shoes," said Laura, looking at Violet's trim suede footgear. "Especially with prices going up."

Billie groaned.

"I think I'll have to try Violet's trick," she said. "If anybody mentions the high cost of living to me

while we're away on this vacation, I'll get out and walk home. I don't care if it's a hundred miles."

"Going up?" laughed Laura, but they promised just the same. For underneath Billie's lightness they knew that she was still puzzling her wits for some way to pay for that broken statue.

"Here comes a man with magazines," said Laura. "We'd better get a couple to pass the time away. An all-day trip is pretty tiresome. At least I've heard mother say so."

They bought the magazines, but they might just as well not have done so, for when they reached Roland late that afternoon they had hardly peeped inside the covers.

The scenery was so beautiful and wild, the whole trip was so wonderfully novel that the time flew, and before they realized it they had reached the station next to Roland.

"Goodness, I didn't think we were anywhere near there, yet!" cried Violet, as she began to gather up her things. "I never knew a day to go so quickly in my life. Billie, are these your candies? You'd better not leave them on the seat."

"Who said I was going to?" cried Billie, rescuing her sweets just as Laura was in the act of sitting on them. "Here, there's just room for them in the corner of my grip. Mrs. Gilligan, have you got the trunk checks?"

"I hope so," said the woman, opening her hand bag.

The girls watched her breathlessly and sighed with relief when she drew out the checks.

"All safe and sound," she said. "Now get on your hats and coats, girls. We're apt to have a wild scramble at the last if you aren't ready beforehand."

So, laughing and excited, the girls obeyed her, putting on their wraps hurriedly and laughing at Laura when she got her hat over one eye.

"Here, put it on straight," cried Billie, performing that service for her friend. "We don't want to have our reputations ruined the minute we step on the platform. Who ever heard of a perfect lady with her hat over one eye?"

"Well, if you don't like my company——" Laura began good-naturedly, as she squinted at her distorted reflection in the little two-by-four mirror set in the tiny space of wall between the windows. "Gracious, Billie, you took it off of one eye to put it over the other. Do I look more like a perfect lady with my hat over my right eye?"

Billie chuckled and pushed the hat over Laura's nose, at which Laura would have protested vigorously and, if must be, forcefully, if there had not been other passengers in the train besides themselves. As it was, she had to be content with an indignant stare, which Billie, with twinkling eyes, calmly turned her back upon.

"Roland! Roland!" called the conductor in stentorian tones, and with little squeals of excitement the girls found their hand baggage, gave one last little pat to their hats, and started toward the door.

"You go first, Mrs. Gilligan," cried Violet, pushing that woman before her.

"I wonder if Vi expects the ghosts to meet us at the station?" chuckled Laura in Billie's ear. "She reminds me of a relative of ours who always pushes her escort in front of her when she meets a strange dog."

Billie giggled, caught her grip on the arm of one of the seats, rescued it again, and finally made her way with the others to the platform.

It was a rather old and broken-down platform, just as Roland proved to be a rather old and broken-down place, and the girls stood on it ruefully as they watched the train rumble off in the distance.

"Now we're in for it," said Billie, her eyes taking in a disconsolate-looking store or two and a drooping post-office. "I wonder if this is what they call the village?"

"Well, we're not going to live here," said Mrs. Gilligan briskly. "And you can't expect to find a thriving town away off a hundred miles from nowhere. Come on, let's see if we can find some sort of a wagon to take us and our belongings to Cherry Corners. I don't suppose," she added, as they crossed the street toward a building a little more

dilapidated than the rest that had the words Livery Stable painted on a blurred sign over the door, "that there is any sort of hotel or boarding house where we might put up for the night."

"Mother didn't remember about that. You see she had been here only once," said Billie. "But I don't imagine there is—any place that we would want to stay at," she added, making a wry little face.

The place, in truth, was not attractive, nor did it promise much, outwardly at least, as a refuge for the night. Besides the street on which were the forlorn looking stores and the post-office and a few other nondescript looking buildings that might have been used for almost any possible purpose, there seemed to be but two streets on which were built the dwelling houses. These, for the most part, were simple and plain enough, each with its yard, well or ill kept, in front and a garden and chicken yard behind. Only one was a little more pretentious in appearance, but that, too, had attached to it its garden and chicken yard.

However, they found that there was no necessity for their finding a place, if place there was to be found to stay for the night. They found the owner of the livery stable with two old but well-preserved vehicles which he was eager to place at their disposal.

They spent some time in getting enough provisions to last for a time and to supplement what

had been sent from North Bend; then, in half an hour more, with their luggage coming on behind, they were lumbering off over a very rocky road toward the house at Cherry Corners.

Mrs. Gilligan was sitting in front with the driver while the three girls were wedged uncomfortably in the back seat.

"It—it's lucky we're not fat!" gasped Laura, as a particularly rough place in the road fairly shook the breath out of her. "I don't know where we would have put ourselves."

"One of us would have had to sit on the trunks on the cart," chuckled Billie. "Ouch!" she cried, as they bounced over another "thank you ma'am," "I'm glad we haven't any more than five miles to go. There wouldn't be any of us left alive."

"Five miles!" grumbled Violet. "And my foot's asleep already."

"Here, have some candy," offered Billie soothingly, fishing one out of her pocket. "It may make you feel better."

"Well, it couldn't make me feel worse," said Violet, accepting the offering. "Although," she added, with a laugh, "I don't see how it is going to help my sleepy foot."

"Well, get up and stretch," advised Laura. "Seventh inning."

Violet started to follow her advice but was flung

back full force into Billie's lap, thereby squeezing out a startled "Umph!" from the sufferer.

"Say, you needn't take it out on me," cried Billie indignantly. "I didn't put your foot to sleep."

"She's no nurse girl," murmured Laura.

The girls laughed and forgot their discomfort.

After a long time of jostling and squeezing they rounded a turn of the road and Billie cried out.

"There it is!" she said, standing up in the jolting vehicle. "Over there through the trees! Oh, girls! doesn't it look gloomy?"

CHAPTER XIV

WEIRD TALES

"AYE, and it is gloomy."

Startled, the girls looked around for the voice, then realized that it was their driver who had spoken. He had been silent all the way from the station, and they had all but forgotten him.

"What made you say that?" asked Billie, rather wonderingly. For although the man had only repeated her own words, the tone in which he said them made them appear twice as ominous.

"It's a gloomy place," he said once more, with a shake of his head. "Aye, and there be some folks around here as says it is haunted."

"Do—do they really think so?" stammered Violet Farrington, beginning to wish herself back in North Bend.

"Aye, they think so," he answered, in the same monotonous voice. "And there be some times that I don't blame 'em for what they thinks."

"Do you think it's haunted?" asked Billie, with the hint of a laugh in her voice. Even here, in this forsaken place, with dusk coming on and the pros-

pect of spending a night in a house people called haunted, Billie's sense of humor did not altogether leave her. "Do you?" she repeated, the laughter still more marked in her voice.

The driver twisted around in his seat to see her before he answered.

"It's all very well for you to laugh now," he answered. "But maybe you won't feel so much like laughin' in the morning."

In spite of herself, Billie shivered a little, and the other girls looked frightened.

"If I was you," the driver went on with his unasked advice, "I'd turn right back an' spend the night in Roland. There's a boardin' house——"

"Nonsense, we're not going to turn back," spoke up Mrs. Gilligan, a trifle sharply, for she could see that the driver's evil prophecies were getting on the girls' nerves. "If there are any ghosts in that house —which of course there ain't—they'd just better show their faces around me, that's all. I'll give 'em such a taste of my rolling pin that they'll get discouraged for good and all."

She nodded her head vigorously, and the girls laughed.

"All right, all right," grumbled the driver, disgruntled at having his ideas treated in this high-handed manner. "You can laugh all you're wanting to. But I tell you, if it was me——"

"Which it isn't," Mrs. Gilligan interrupted shortly.

"I wouldn't stay in that there haunted place for a farm, I wouldn't."

"What makes you think it's haunted?" Laura persisted, for, of the three girls, Laura was by far the most curious. "Do people see lights and hear funny noises and such things?"

"Laura——" began Violet in protest.

"Why no, Miss," said the driver reluctantly. "I don't know as they actually seen things, but they has heard queer noises. There was some boys once," he went on, warming to his task of story teller, "as thought they'd have some fun. You know the old lady what owned the place was nearly allus away and just left it to a caretaker that didn't take over much care of it——" He stopped to chuckle, and the girls leaned forward eagerly.

"What about them?" asked Billie impatiently.

"Well, they thought as they'd play burglar an' break into the place an' make a regular lark of it."

"Weren't they afraid they'd get caught?" asked Laura.

"Not with Sheriff Higgins on the job," chuckled the driver, in high good humor now that he was getting off his favorite yarn. They were nearing the house and the girls hurried him on impatiently.

"Well, they heard such funny humming noises and jingling like the rattling of chains an' things,"

said the driver, "that they got most scared to death and ran back home like the old Nick was after them. Ever since then folks has said the place was haunted."

"Stuff and rubbish!" said Mrs. Gilligan, as the team came to a stop before the house. "A nice lot o' talk I call that to fill the girls up with. Rattlin' of chains and hummin' noises! Huh!" And with her nose in the air to show her contempt of all such notions she swept out of the carriage.

The girls followed, and ran back to the wagon that contained their luggage and some provisions. The boy who had been driving this wagon was already unloading it, and the old fellow who had told them such gloomy tales came hobbling back to lend a hand.

Billie fished in her pocketbook for the key to the house which was supposed to be haunted, and, finding it, held it up with a hand that was not quite steady.

"Come on," she said. "We've got to do it, I suppose."

"Wh-who's going first?" asked Violet, regarding the gloomy bulk of the rambling old house, now half hidden in the dusk, with troubled eyes.

"I am, of course," said Billie stoutly, adding with a gay little laugh: "I guess it's my right, isn't it? Why, this is my house—the first I've ever owned!"

"And welcome you be to it," murmured the old

man, to be promptly cowed by a withering look from Mrs. Gilligan.

"Come on," cried Billie again. "I'll go first, but you'll have to promise to follow me in."

"Why, of course we'll follow you in," said Violet, loyal through all her fear. "You don't suppose we'd let you go into that awful place alone, do you?"

"Well, I like that!" cried Billie, leading the way up the stone-paved walk. "Calling my beautiful old homestead an awful place."

"Yes, I'm surprised at you, Vi," added Laura, as she followed close at Billie's heels. "Don't you know you should have some tact? Even if it is awful, you shouldn't talk about it——"

Billie stopped and stared indignantly.

"If you say another word," she threatened, "I'll make you go first."

The threat had the desired effect, and both Violet and Laura protested that it was the most beautiful place on the face of the earth, or words to that effect.

"You'd better be giving the key to me," said Mrs. Gilligan. "We can't stand out here talkin' all night. Besides, the door probably has an old-fashioned lock on it, and they ain't a lock anywhere that can fool me."

Billie meekly handed over the key, and Mrs. Gilligan marched majestically before them up to

the front door. She bent down to examine the lock, then fitted the key into it.

With a groaning and squeaking of rusty hinges, the heavy door swung inward, and the girls found themselves staring into a black well of hallway that seemed to have no windows anywhere.

"Gracious! did anybody think to bring matches?" asked Laura in an awed whisper.

"Sure and I did," Mrs. Gilligan's matter-of-fact voice reassured her. "Five whole boxes I brought. But I've got something even better than that for the present occasion."

She drew from the pocket of her coat a small electric torch and flashed it into the interior of the house. The bright light showed them glimpses of queer chairs standing about in odd corners and finally lighted up a broad stairway.

"It's the hall," announced Mrs. Gilligan. "Now forward march, and we'll soon find out where the lights are."

"There must be a push button somewhere," suggested Violet, and even in their present nervous state the other girls laughed at her.

"A push button!" cried Laura. "Do you expect to find electric lights out in this wilderness?"

"We're lucky if we find a chandelier somewhere," added Billie. "I hope we don't have to burn candles or lamps. They aren't just exactly what you might call cheerful."

"And something cheerful is what we need," added Laura ruefully.

"Well, if you're after acetylene gas I guess you'll be disappointed," said Mrs. Gilligan as her torch lighted up a wonderful old-fashioned richly carved candelabrum containing a dozen candles, half burned and looking rather wilted. "It's candles we'll be burning while we're here."

The girls groaned.

"But they give such a ghostly, flickering light," protested Violet, as if it were in some way Mrs. Gilligan's fault. "I know I'll never be able to stand it," and she glanced nervously over her shoulder.

"Well, could you stand the dark any better?" asked Mrs. Gilligan practically, as she began to light the candles one after another. "There will probably be other candelabra in the house, and if you get enough of them burning there's nothing in this world that is prettier. For myself I just love candle light."

"Yes, when you're in civilization," put in Laura. "But not out here."

"I've found another one!" cried Billie, who had been prospecting on her own account. "And here's another! Why we'll have a big illumination before we're through."

"That's the way to talk," said Mrs. Gilligan approvingly, as she crossed over to Billie's side of the large hall and began to light the other candles. "If we just make the best of everything and make up

our minds to have a good time, we'll have a good time. And if we don't we might just as well take the driver's advice and go home again."

"Go home? Well I should just say not!" cried Laura. "The very idea of such a thing! The boys would tease the life out of us. We'd never hear the end of it."

"Well then, we're going to have a good time," Mrs. Gilligan decided, adding, as she turned toward the door: "Where have those men gone? I told them to bring in the things."

She went out to see about it with the girls at her heels and found the old man and the boy in a heated argument over something.

"Well, if you want to go into that there haunted house, it's your concern," the old man was saying in a querulous voice. "As for me, I wouldn't step a foot inside of it, no sir, not if you was to give me a farm!"

CHAPTER XV

A NOISE IN THE DARK

"MAYBE you wouldn't do it for a farm," said Mrs. Gilligan, striding resolutely toward the man and the boy, while the two drew apart and stared at her in surprise, "but you're goin' to do it for me. If you think I'm going to lug those trunks and provisions and things into the house all by myself, you never was so much mistaken in your life. What do you suppose I'm paying you my good money for? Now, get a move on and hurry those things inside, or I'll have to take a hand in the matter myself. Trunks first!"

And too much surprised by this deluge of words to refuse, the old man turned to the trunks, and, assisted by the boy, carried them into the hall.

"This is far enough," he said, but Mrs. Maria Gilligan, accustomed to having her own way, would have none of it.

"Upstairs," she ordered. "You don't suppose we are going to sleep on the ground floor, do you? And we're not going to carry them ourselves, either."

And once more the old man obeyed her, while the

boy, wicked youngster, laughed at him behind his back.

"If you meet a ghost coming downstairs, Gramper," he taunted, "just tell him to be careful and not stumble over you. There now, be careful, will you? You almost dropped the thing on my foot."

The girls watched the two go upstairs with Mrs. Gilligan bringing up the rear to make sure they did not stop half way, and then turned to each other with a queer expression, half of amusement, half of uneasiness, on their faces.

"Well, we always wanted an adventure," said Laura, as they turned back to the open door, feeling an instinctive need of getting out of the house, "and now we're having one."

"A regular one," agreed Billie, adding decidedly: "And I'm going to enjoy myself. Why, Laura," with a touch of excitement, "did you notice those funny old chairs and things? They're really very pretty, and they are surely very old. I shouldn't wonder——"

"Oh, Billie," cried Violet rapturously, "do you suppose you could get real money for them? If you could," she added with the air of a martyr that made the girls laugh, "it would be worth even braving the ghosts for."

"You don't really believe that silly thing, do you?"

asked Billie, turning back into the hall. "It's all in a foolish old man's imagination."

"All right. And now you can bring in the provisions," they heard Mrs. Gilligan directing. "I don't know where the kitchen is, but I suppose there is one somewhere. I'll find it while you start to bring the things in."

"We'll each take a candle," cried Billie, her eyes shining in the flickering candle light, "and look for the kitchen. Come on, girls, follow the leader."

So, with Mrs. Gilligan at the head, they marched through what seemed to be a library, seen dimly by the light thrown by their four candles, into a room whose table and chairs showed it to be the dining-room.

"The kitchen must be just beyond, then," said Laura, beginning to enjoy herself immensely. "There's a door, Mrs. Gilligan. Look out—don't bump your head."

But Mrs. Gilligan had no intention of bumping her head. She swung open the door in question, and they found themselves in a butler's pantry that seemed almost as large as Billie's bedroom at home.

"Goodness! the Powerson that first built the house must have expected to entertain lots of company," exclaimed Violet, looking with wonder at the rows of curtained cupboards. "I wonder if there are dishes in all of them?"

"We haven't time to look now," said Mrs. Gilli-

gan, stopping her as she was about to peep inside a closet. "We can do all that to-morrow when we have daylight. Ah, here's the kitchen," she added, as she stepped into a huge room—the regular type of a very old kitchen that could be used as sitting-room as well.

"Gracious, it's a house!" cried Billie, moving her candle about in an effort to light up the corners of the place. "There isn't any end to it."

"I'm glad I don't have to keep it clean as a steady job," said Mrs. Gilligan grimly. "Now, girls, let's go back and find our two friends with the provisions. I don't know how you feel about it, but as for me, a little something to eat wouldn't go at all bad."

"We're just starved," they cried, and began a concerted rush back to the front of the house where their "friends with the provisions" were.

However, when they arrived there, they found the provisions spread upon the driveway but the man and boy had disappeared.

"Humph!" grunted Mrs. Gilligan, her mouth straightening to a grim line, "I had more than a notion that that old fellow would clear out, and of course the young one wouldn't stay alone. I shouldn't have trusted them out of my sight!"

She began picking up bags and packages, and the girls followed suit. Before very long they had gathered up all the provisions and were staggering back, arms laden, toward the house.

They found their way back to the kitchen again and dropped the things thankfully on the table.

"Now for something to eat!" cried Laura. "What shall we have, Mrs. Gilligan? I suppose it will have to be a cold supper," she added, looking about for some means of cooking and discovering only an immense coal stove.

"I suppose it would take forever to make a fire in that," said Billie, indicating the stove and thinking longingly of hot steak and potatoes, "even if they have any coal."

"Here's plenty of coal," said Mrs. Gilligan, who had been finding things out in her own practical and efficient way, "and here is plenty of wood and old newspapers to start it going. Indeed and we're not going to have any cold supper," she added, while in imagination the girls already were sniffing the aroma of broiling steak. "Not after that long ride an' cheerful conversation!"

With the prospect of supper, and a hot supper, so close at hand, the girls could laugh at the gloomy stories of the old driver.

"We'll help," cried Laura. "Come on, girls, let's see if we can find enough dishes to set the table."

So they went gayly to work, setting the table and peeling potatoes, which Mrs. Gilligan proceeded to fry, and enjoyed themselves immensely.

"Shall we eat in the kitchen?" asked Violet, pausing with a pile of plates in her hand. "Or shall we

be very proper and eat in the dining-room?"

"Oh, the kitchen's a lot more cheerful," said Billie, shivering a little in spite of herself as she thought of the dark, rather dreary room just the other side of the door.

"Besides, what we want we want in a hurry," said Laura, taking the dishes from Violet and setting them decidedly on the table. "To-morrow will be time enough to put on airs. Just now all I want to do is to eat!"

While they were waiting for the supper to cook and after they had done as much as they could toward its preparation, the girls looked about the kitchen and the gloomy dining room a bit. The latter room was dark and cheerless, and they wondered that any one should have selected it for a dining room. The woodwork was all of black walnut, and there was much of it, the window frames and door frames being heavy and ornate and the room being wainscoted with the same dark wood. The room was large, too, and there were windows at one end only, and that toward the north.

"Oh, come! let us get out of here," finally cried Laura, grabbing each of the other girls by an arm and running with them out into the more cheerful kitchen.

"Oh, that steak!" cried Billie longingly, as she drifted over to the stove. "Isn't it nearly done, Mrs. Gilligan? This is cruelty to animals."

Mrs. Gilligan chuckled and turned the steak on the other side.

"Almost ready now," she said, adding another piece of butter to the golden browned potatoes. "Have you girls cut the cake? It's in one of the packages I brought in—on the end of the table. Don't cut it all now," she warned, as there was a joyful rush for the cake. "We want some of it left for to-morrow."

The girls did not cut it all—quite. But they did cut a good two-thirds of it—and ate it all, too!

It was a strange sort of meal—the candle-lit kitchen, the hastily set table, the faces of the girls and Mrs. Gilligan brought out in bold relief by the flickering candle light.

The meal was delicious, and the girls ate ravenously, but from time to time one of them would shift uneasily in her seat and look nervously over her shoulder into the dark corners of the room.

Instead of the dinner making them more courageous, it seemed to be having the opposite effect, for when they had finished their cake and the steaming hot coffee, they found themselves talking in whispers as if they were afraid of the sound of their own voices.

Billie, suddenly realizing this, spoke aloud, and Laura and Violet jumped nervously.

"What's the matter with us?" Billie asked, her voice sounding strangely loud and unnatural even

to herself in the hushed stillness all about. "We never used to be so awfully quiet. And I'm sure we don't have to whisper about it."

"I—I suppose," shivered Violet, "that it's because everything else is so quiet. It sort of has its effect on us. I wish," she added, with a sudden little outburst unusual in Violet, "that that horrid old driver hadn't told us that horrid story. I catch myself listening for noises all the time."

"But that's foolish," said Mrs. Gilligan, in that every-day, matter-of-fact tone that never failed to give the girls courage. "There isn't one of us who believes anything he said, so why let it worry us? Come on," she said, rising and beginning to gather together the dishes, "we'll get these things put away in a hurry, and then go up to bed. I think a good night's rest is what you need."

"Oh, but I don't want to go up in the spooky upstairs part," whispered Violet to Billie, as she scraped some odds and ends off on a plate. "Oh, why didn't we travel by night, so that we could have reached here in the morning?"

"Well, we didn't, so there's no use worrying about it," said Billie sharply, for the situation was beginning to get on her own nerves. She had caught herself dreading the moment when they must leave the more or less cheerful kitchen for the upper floor of the house.

And then the minute came.

"Take a couple of candles apiece and follow me," Mrs. Gilligan said. "I had your grips all put in the upper hall. Now then, let's find out what kind of beds we have to sleep in—if any!"

So, with little creepy chills chasing themselves up and down their spines, the girls obeyed, keeping close together and looking fearfully into the dark shadows.

They had just started up the stairs when Violet cried out, her voice sounding sharp in the stillness:

"What's that?"

Right over their heads there came a creepy, slithery sound, followed by a loud thump.

The girls groaned and clutched each other.

"The ghost!" said Violet, in a terrified whisper.

CHAPTER XVI

SHADOWS AND MYSTERY

"WELL, if it's a ghost," announced Mrs. Maria Gilligan in a loud voice, "I never did hear one that sounded so much like a suitcase sliding off a trunk."

The girls giggled and followed Mrs. Gilligan as she strode up the stairs. The flickering candles made grotesque shadows on the walls; the house, after that noise, was as still as a tomb, and despite the comforting presence of their valiant chaperone, the girls kept close together for protection.

"D-do you suppose it was only a s-suitcase?" stammered Violet.

"Don't whisper in my ear—you tickle," hissed Billie, and again they laughed hysterically.

"Look out, now, go slow," Mrs. Gilligan was cautioning them. "We don't want to stumble over this luggage and get a broken leg or two. Ouch!" she exclaimed, as she stubbed her toe against something hard. "I guess I'm the first casualty!"

She bent down to find what she had stumbled against, while the girls glanced nervously into the

corners of the hall which the flickering candle light only seemed to make more dark.

"Goodness, if we feel like this now, I don't see how we're ever going to spend the night here," cried Laura, shivering a little. "I don't believe I'll be able to sleep a wink."

"Oh, yes, you will," said Billie, trying hard to make her voice sound natural and unconcerned. "We're all so tired we couldn't help sleeping anywhere."

"Just as I thought," said Mrs. Gilligan, referring to the object she had stubbed her toe against. "Your suitcase, Billie, and the creepy noise we heard was when it slid off the trunk. Come on now," she added, holding her candle high over her head again, "let's see what we can find in the way of bedrooms."

"Let's go in the first door we reach," suggested Billie, and at the moment Mrs. Gilligan's candle showed a wide, high doorway leading into a black cavern of a room.

"Well, here's the first one," she said. "If we have luck and find some bedding——"

She was already feeling her way cautiously between several chairs and tables, with the girls following close behind.

"There's the bed!" cried Laura. "Oh, isn't it funny? A regular old four-poster."

"With a canopy over it!" marveled Violet.

"And it's made up with clean things," added

Billie, making another discovery. "Goodness, it makes you feel like the 'Little Princess' when she found all the good things in her room."

"Sure enough, it has been made fresh," said Mrs. Gilligan, as she wonderingly turned down a somewhat dusty spread and disclosed snowy sheets beneath.

"Somebody's been keeping house anyway," said Laura.

"Here's room for two of you girls," said Mrs. Gilligan.

"Oh, we all three want to sleep together," cried Violet, fearful that she might be picked to sleep alone. "There's safety in numbers."

"All right, but I have to sleep somewhere," Mrs. Gilligan reminded her with a wry little smile. "Aren't you going to help me find some place? This may be the only bed that's in sleeping condition in the house."

"Then we'd have to sleep four in a bed," said Billie, with a chuckle. "But come on, let's see if some kind fairy hasn't prepared for you too, Mrs. Gilligan."

Laughing, the girls pushed out into the hall and looked for the next doorway. They no longer glanced fearfully in the corners for something they were afraid to see. The thought of the nice clean bed pushed all their weird fancies into the back-

ground. Ghosts and clean beds did not seem to go together!

They found another room just as clean as the other one, and also with a canopied four-poster in one corner. With cries of delight the girls discovered that it also was ready for occupancy.

"Goodness, I wonder who could have done it?" mused Violet, as she dropped down on the edge of the bed and regarded the girls wonderingly.

"Maybe it was a ghost," said Laura, with a chuckle, and Violet glanced around uneasily.

"Can't you forget about ghosts for five minutes?" she asked rather irritably, for she was tired after the long day's trip. "Just when I'm beginning to be happy——"

"There, there," cried Billie soothingly. "Don't go and get mad, Vi, darling, or our last hope will be gone. I guess Aunt Beatrice left it this way. Gracious! what's that?"

"Only me opening a door," said Mrs. Gilligan from the farther end of the room. "My, but you girls are jumpy! Better get to bed," she added, crossing over to them with a decided step. "You're tired, and everything will seem better in the morning. Off with you now. No, not that way," as they started toward the hall, the way they had come in. "I've found a door between our two rooms—it was opening that that made you jump. See?"

"A connecting door!" cried Billy delightedly. "Oh, that's fine!"

"Yes, you can lock your door, Mrs. Gilligan, and we'll lock ours, and we'll all be as snug——"

"As bugs in a rug," finished Laura, putting an arm about Violet and pushing her into the other room.

"Aren't you going to take your candles?" Mrs. Gilligan called after them. "I fancy you'll need them to undress by."

"I fancy I'll need mine all night," said Laura in an undertone with a wry little grimace, as Violet went back for the candles. "I'm just scared to death to stay here in the dark."

"But we won't be able to keep these burning all night," said Billie, pausing in the act of unlacing her shoe to gaze at her half-burned candle. "They will probably burn out in a couple of hours."

Laura looked panicky.

"Well, some one will have to go down and get some more," she said, and gazed at Billie thoughtfully.

"Goodness, you needn't look at me when you say that," said the latter, going energetically to work on the other shoe. "I wouldn't go down into that gloomy place again for all the money there is in the world."

"But we'll be left in the dark," said Laura, staring at Billie as if it were all her fault.

"Who said anything about being left in the dark?" asked Violet, returning with a candle in each hand, the flickering light illumining her face and making her look like some saint.

"I did, and we will if you don't go down and get more candles," said Laura, turning her fire against the newcomer.

"Go down and get candles all by myself?" asked Violet. Then she walked over to the table and set the two candles down with a decided thump. "You're crazy," she said.

"Well, the best thing I can see to do," said Billie, letting down her long hair and brushing it vigorously, "is to get to bed, go to sleep, and forget all about it."

"Yes, if we *can* sleep," said Laura doubtfully, as she took her nightgown out of the grip.

The girls undressed as quickly as they could, said their prayers, and crawled under the sheets, pulling them up tight beneath their chins.

"You know," whispered Billie, after they had been quiet for some time staring up at the ceiling, "I have an idea that I've got the worst of this bargain."

"Now what are you raving about?" asked Laura, turning a pair of unnaturally bright eyes upon her.

"Why, you chose the middle of the bed and Vi took the end nearest the wall. That leaves me on the outside to ward off the ghosts. It isn't fair."

"Oh, but, Billie dear, you're ever so much braver than we are," said Violet cajolingly. "Don't you remember how you've said right along that you weren't afraid of ghosts?"

"Well, I'm not," said Billie stoutly, while her eyes searched the far corners of the room which were beginning to get very indistinct and creepy in the flickering uncertain light of the fast shortening candles. "And, anyway," she added, the thought seeming to comfort her, "I locked the door."

"Well, don't you know a ghost can walk right through a door?" asked Laura, and Violet bounced in the bed and came down with a thud.

"Stop it," she commanded. "I'm trying my hardest to get to sleep before those candles burn out. When it gets pitch dark in here I never can."

"And all this comes under the head of pleasure," murmured Laura with a little chuckle.

"All right—we'll keep still," agreed Billie. "I think myself that the best thing we can do is get to sleep. Night, girls. We'll all feel better in the morning."

"If we're here to feel anything," added Violet gloomily.

For a long time the girls lay wide-eyed and quiet, but gradually the law of nature asserted itself. Their eyelids drooped, and the deep regular breathing showed that they were asleep.

It was about three o'clock in the morning that it

happened. Tortured by dreams in which she was being chased by a ghost in goggles and a green motor car, Violet finally awoke and lay staring out at the dark.

Then suddenly she sat up. Her dream had followed her into the world of reality. There was the same strange, weird purring noise that sounded like, yet was strangely unlike, the chugging of a motor car.

She sat absolutely still with every nerve tense, feeling chilly and scared.

At last she could stand it no longer and, leaning over, touched Laura gently on the arm.

"What's the matter?" cried the latter, starting up fearfully. At the same moment Billie opened her eyes.

"That noise!" whispered Violet. "Listen!"

CHAPTER XVII

ONLY A BAT

THE three girls sat quiet, every nerve tense, that same chilly sensation creeping up their spines, and their hair beginning to stand on end.

Out there in that wilderness, at three o'clock in the morning, a noise that sounded something like a motor car and yet was unlike anything they had ever heard before, might have frightened more experienced people than three fourteen-year-old girls.

"H-here it comes!" whispered Violet, clutching at Laura's arm, while Laura in her turn clutched at Billie's. "It's coming closer! Oh, girls—is it in the house?"

"Sh!" cried Billie. "It's a machine—it must be a machine—out on the road."

"But in this forsaken place, in the middle of the night?" cried Laura, beginning to shiver as though she were cold. "It—it can't be, Billie!"

"Sh-h," said Billie again. "Listen!"

The purring sound was coming closer, seemed almost in the house, it was so near—— Then came an awful thought to Billie. Could it really be in the

house? Was it possible that those awful stories about ghosts were true?

But no, the noise was passing on, getting softer, softer, dying off in the distance.

"It—it must have been a machine," said Laura, beginning to laugh hysterically. "Vi, what did you go and wake me up in the middle of the night for just to hear an automobile? I was having such a lovely sleep."

"But I'm not so sure it was a motor car," insisted Violet stubbornly, the spell of the dream still upon her. "It didn't sound like it."

"But it couldn't have been anything else," said Billie, trembling a little with the reaction. "We heard it coming down the road, heard it pass the house, and go on. It simply must have been a machine."

"Oh, all right," said Violet, adding with a little sigh: "Well, I guess none of us will sleep any more to-night. I'm not even going to try."

"Well, I am," said Billie, leaning back and closing her eyes, yet knowing that she was as wide awake as she had ever been in her life. "I don't see any use in lying here and listening for things. Good night once more, girls—I'm off."

"Meaning you're crazy?" asked Laura, to which Billie made no reply.

As a matter of fact, even while they were saying they could sleep no more that night, the girls did

go to sleep, and, what is more, slept soundly until they were awakened by Mrs. Gilligan's voice calling to them from the connecting doorway.

"Do you expect to sleep all day?" she was asking them, her face rosy and herself very nice and trim in a light blue house dress. "This is the third time I've spoken to you, and I was beginning to get worried."

"Wh-what time is it?" demanded Laura sleepily.

"About eleven," Mrs. Gilligan answered calmly, and they gasped.

"Eleven!" repeated Billie, sitting up in bed and rubbing her eyes hard. "For goodness' sake, how did it get that way? I feel as if I hadn't had any sleep at all."

"Well, I've had the most awful dreams," complained Violet, turning over as if she intended to go to sleep again. "I've done nothing but dream of ghosts and motor cars all night."

At the mention of ghosts Mrs. Gilligan broke into hearty laughter.

"Ghosts?" she said, her eyes sparkling. "I shouldn't think you'd be talking of ghosts any more. Here you've spent a whole night in the house and no spirits have bothered you yet. I should think you'd be satisfied."

"Oh, but didn't you hear that noise in the night?" Violet asked her, turning over and forgetting the

nap she had been about to take. "We girls were just about scared to death."

"Speak for yourself," said Laura, who, whether she had really been frightened or not, never liked to have anybody tell her about it.

"You were scared too, what's the use of denying it?" Violet demanded hotly, but Mrs. Gilligan interrupted them.

"Never mind about that," she said, with a smile. "Just tell me about this noise you thought you heard."

So the girls told her about their weird experience of the night before, all talking at once and making it as hard as possible for Mrs. Gilligan to understand what it was all about.

"A noise that sounded like a motor car," she said, when they had finished and had paused for lack of breath. "Well, I don't see what's so very queer about that. May have been some joy-riders or something."

"But who would be joy-riding in this part of the country?" Laura objected. "The country people hereabouts probably don't know what the word means."

"That particular sport does seem to belong to the idle rich," Mrs. Gilligan agreed, with a chuckle. "Well," she added, getting up and starting for the door, "whatever it is, or was, we needn't go with-

out our breakfast because of it. How would you like some bacon and eggs and biscuits?"

The suggestion worked like a charm, and before Mrs. Gilligan had finished the girls were out of bed and feeling about for their clothes.

"You know the room doesn't look half bad by daylight," remarked Violet, as she was arranging her hair before an elaborately framed old mirror. "And it surely is quite clean."

"But it's horribly gloomy, just as mother said." Billie was regarding the dingy woodwork, now almost black with age, and the huge four-poster with its funereal canopied top, and the large pictures of dead and gone ancestors that adorned the walls. "The only really good things in the whole room are the tables and chairs. They look," she added hopefully, "as if they might bring in a little money. Perhaps I'll be able to pay for the statue after all."

"Oh, and I'm just crazy to see the rest of the house by daylight," said Laura, clapping her hands. "Come on, you slow pokes, aren't you ever going to be ready?"

"We're ready now," said Billie, putting an arm about Violet and hurrying her to the door. "Oh, is that bacon I smell—and coffee?" she asked as through the open door came a whiff of the good things below.

"You said it!" cried Laura, making a rush for lower floor with Billie and Violet not very far be-

hind her. "And it isn't going to be more than about two minutes before I taste that same bacon and eggs."

When they reached the lower hall they were surprised to see that it looked almost as gloomy and forbidding as it had the night before, in spite of the fact that the front door was open and sunlight was streaming through.

"Ugh!" said Laura, with a shudder, "I don't wonder that they had gloomy dispositions in the old days if they had to live in houses like these. It's enough to give one the creeps."

"I'm glad you like my property so much," said Billie, with a demure little smile. "I haven't heard you say one nice thing about it yet."

"We have treated our hostess rather rudely, haven't we?" laughed Violet, putting an arm about Billie and drawing her out into the sunshine. "But really, Billie, we're quite sure that you don't like it any better than we do."

"And you are quite right," Billie assured her, then added, breaking away and running a little in front of them: "Girls, let's see if we can find any signs of that car we heard last night."

Eagerly they scanned the rocky road, but could see no traces of any vehicle that would be big enough to make the noise they had heard the night before.

"The plot thickens," said Laura, as they started

back to the house to eat the bacon and eggs and biscuits. "We hear a car, but see no traces of it."

"It must have been a spirit car," said Violet, adding, with a plaintive little sigh that made the girls laugh: "In spite of all my perfectly good training, I'm beginning to believe in ghosts."

After breakfast the girls roamed around the big house, nosing into corners, calling each other's attention to this and that queer ornament or article of furniture—and there were plenty of them,—and otherwise thoroughly enjoying themselves. But as yet they did not venture into the gloomy cellar with its mysterious tunnels.

In the drawing-room they found a queer old piano which Violet declared must date back farther than Revolutionary days and which Billie, amid gibes and laughter from her chums, tried to play.

After she had tried and failed on half a dozen different compositions, she gave up the attempt, and they roamed upstairs, looking through one room after another until Billie accidentally opened the door that led to the attic.

"Here's where we want to go, girls," she cried. "Mother said this was the spookiest place in the whole house—except the cellar."

"Hadn't we better get Mrs. Gilligan to go with us?" asked Violet, holding back. "After last night I've had enough spooky experiences to last me a week."

"Oh, come on," cried Laura, running ahead of them up the stairs. "I'll show you two 'fraid cats——"

"Who's a 'fraid cat?" cried Billie, starting in hot pursuit. "I'll have you know that nobody dares call me such names and get away with it. Come on, Vi, let's murder her."

"Just try it," Laura hissed at them dramatically from the head of the stairs. "I'd turn into another ghost and haunt you!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, leave her alone, Billie," Violet entreated. "We've got enough ghosts around here without Laura. What's that?"

"If you're going to scare me again," began Laura, but it was Billie this time who commanded silence.

"Hush, I did hear something queer," she said, and all three listened intently.

It came again, a weird little noise like the brushing of wings against some hard object, and the girls scarcely dared to breathe. Then out into the hot open attic fluttered a tiny little object with webbed wings and the body of a mouse.

"A bat!" cried Laura, sinking down weakly and shaking with hysterical laughter. "Oh, girls, if I have to stay here another week I'll just die of heart failure—I know I will!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A FISH STORY

THE days passed without further scares until the time finally came when the boys were to arrive.

During those days the girls roamed around the farm attached to Cherry Corners. They found it for the most part a rocky place, with here and there dense patches of woods. There was a brook and in this they saw some small fish darting about.

"Maybe the boys will want to go fishing when they come," suggested Billie.

The cherry trees also interested the chums—there were so many of them. The late cherries were ripe, and they spent a day in picking them, donning overalls for that purpose. Mrs. Gilligan took the fruit and made several delicious pies and also a number of tarts.

The place was certainly a lonesome one. Only once did they see two men tramp by. The men eyed the girls curiously, but tramped on without speaking.

"Certainly not very sociable," was Violet's comment.

At last came the time when the boys were to arrive.

The girls were in a fever of excitement and anticipation, for they knew that they would have just about twice as much fun with the boys as without them.

"We can go on picnics," said Laura, putting on her hat over one eye as she had a habit of doing when unusually excited, "and long tramps in the woods, and—oh, all sorts of things."

"I wonder if that old wagon will ever come," said Violet, looking anxiously down the road. "If it doesn't hurry we'll be too late to meet the train."

The boy who daily brought them provisions from the village had been commissioned to send the antiquated carriage after the girls so that they could get down to the village in time to meet the early train. But the girls, with no confidence in the country lad's memory, had been sure he would forget all about it.

"If he doesn't come pretty soon, the boys will get off the train with no one to meet them," Violet went on worrying. "They won't know where to go."

"Goodness, they'll know where to go just as well as we did," said Billie, regarding herself sideways in the mirror to be sure she had not forgotten anything. "They aren't infants, you know."

"Here it comes! Here it comes!" sang out Laura

from her place at the window. "Are you ready, girls?"

The answer was a concerted rush for the stairs and in another minute the girls were out in the bright sunlight, running to meet the stage.

The driver, who had been nodding in his seat, looked up as if surprised at so much energy so early in the morning.

"Oh, please hurry," cried Billie, exasperated at the stupid look on the boy's face. "Don't you know that we're late already?"

"No'm, you're not late," he assured her in a voice that matched his manner. "The ten-thirty train's always 'bout half an hour late, anyways."

"Well, that's just the reason it will probably be on time this morning," remarked Billie, scrambling in after the girls. "When I'm late the trains are always early. Please hurry," she added, and the driver clucked half-heartedly to his team.

All the way down they worried for fear they would be late, but when they reached Roland at last they found that their rural driver knew the habits of trains in that part of the country better than they did, for they had a full thirty-five minutes to wait.

However, they roused from their despondent attitudes when they heard a familiar whistle in the distance, and began automatically to straighten their hats.

"Suppose they made up their minds not to come

on this train?" Violet suggested, but Laura cut in hastily.

"If you're going to start worrying all over again about something different," she said, "I'll put you on the track and let the train run over you."

At this dire threat Violet stopped worrying, vocally at least, and they stood first on one foot, then on the other, eagerly watching the train as it rounded a curve and came pounding down toward them.

It had hardly drawn up to the station with a screeching of brakes and come to a standstill before a cyclonic trio of boys leaped from one of the rear cars and came dashing toward the girls, waving hats and bags and various other personal articles high in the air as they came.

"I say, but it was bully of you girls to come to meet us!" shouted Ferd Stowing, as they came within hailing distance. "It was more than we expected, eh, fellows?"

"Sure! Didn't think you'd be up yet," answered Teddy, looking exceedingly handsome—at least to Billie.

"Up yet!" cried Billie, trying to look angry, which she could not do because she was altogether too happy and excited. "I don't know where you boys get your ideas, anyway."

"Out of our brilliant craniums," said Ferd modestly. "I say, girls, where do we go from here?"

"There's an old carriage that looks as if it were

on its last legs," laughed Violet, leading the way back to where the antiquated vehicle and its sleepy driver awaited them. "We came up in it, but I don't know how we're all going to squeeze into it going back."

"Say, fellows, we forgot to get our trunks," said Chet, interrupting himself in the midst of an earnest conversation with his sister. "Give me your checks and I'll go back and see about them."

"But if there isn't room for us, how are we ever going to get our baggage to the house?" Teddy asked.

"We'll get the wagon that took ours up," Laura answered. "We've got to get some provisions, anyway."

So with a great deal of fun and laughter they looked up the ancient wagon and went to the general store to get a formidable supply of provisions.

"Looks as if you were buying the store out," Teddy remarked, as Billie pulled out a long list of items. "What's the big idea?"

"You boys," said Billie, dimpling at him. "We knew what kind of appetites you would bring along with you, so we decided on safety first."

"Now we know you girls are bright," said Ferd admiringly, and Billie made a face at him.

The ride to the house was one big lark. The boys sat on the trunks among the provisions, and the girls went off into gales of merriment at their comical

efforts not to step on the eggs or fall among the fruit. They were having such an awfully good time that even the solemn old driver had to join in the fun.

At last they reached Billie's house, and with much ceremony the boys jumped down from the wagon and ran to the carriage to help the girls out. And all they got for their pains was scorn and derision on the part of the girls.

"Get out of the way before I step on you, little speck of dust," Laura cried haughtily to Ferd, who turned up his collar and slunk along toward the house as though his humiliation were more than he could bear, amid shouts of laughter from the merry crowd that followed him.

"That's the way to treat 'em, Laura," Chet cried, but at that Ferd turned upon him.

"Say, you'd better look out," he said belligerently. "I can't hit a lady——"

"A which?" murmured Billie, with a wicked glance in Laura's direction.

"For calling me names," continued Ferd, glaring at Chet, who began to tremble in mock fright; "but there's nothing to keep me from wiping the ground up——"

"Yes there is! It's my ground, and I won't have it wiped up," said Billie decidedly, at which Ferd had to laugh and the mock war came to a close.

"Say, this is some classy place, what?" said Chet,

stopping in front of the rambling old house and regarding it admiringly. "Have you met with any ghosts yet, girls?"

"Oh, half a dozen," said Laura indifferently, and he was just about to ask some more questions when Mrs. Gilligan met them at the door and began giving instructions.

After that there was nothing to do but obey, and the boys and girls did not meet again until lunch time. Then they regarded each other across the table joyfully.

"I say, let's go for a tramp in the woods this afternoon," Ferd suggested, after he and the other lads had taken a look around the house. "This is the prettiest, wildest country I've ever seen, and I'd like to nose about a little."

"But we thought you'd like to see what the attic and cellar look like," said Billie. "We had the afternoon all planned."

"Let's do that to-morrow," Ferd begged boyishly. "This is too nice a day to spend indoors."

So it was decided to go outside and as soon as the dinner dishes were cleared away—at which the boys assisted without so much as a grumble—the young folks started out on their tour of discovery.

The girls had spent much of their time in the old house since their arrival, for they had found an almost inexhaustible supply of strange corners and un-

expected rooms and peculiar ornaments that had fascinated them.

But to-day, as they felt the warm sunshine on their heads, as the wind caressed their faces and the scents of the woodland bathed them in perfume, they were glad they had let the boys have their way and had decided to spend the glorious afternoon in the open.

"Did you win the tennis singles?" Billie asked of Teddy, as she stopped to smell a bunch of strange flowers. "I was rooting for you."

"Were you?" asked Teddy eagerly.

"For you—and Chet," she added demurely, and laughed to see his face fall.

"But did you?" she asked.

"What?"

"Win the tennis singles, silly? Can't you remember a thing two seconds?"

"Why, yes, we did," he answered absently, his gray eyes on Billie's lovely mischievous face. "In fact, we just ran rings around them. I guess——"

He stopped short as they came upon the other young people. A couple of bearded men had come out of the woods and confronted the crowd. Each man carried a heavy club. They were the fellows who had once passed the girls without speaking.

"You can't go any further this way," one of them said in a rather gruff tone. "We're growing a new

variety of corn and want to keep the seed to ourselves."

"What's that?" demanded Chet in astonishment.

"You heard what I said. You can't stay here, and you can't go that way."

"You want to get out of here," growled the second man. "Come, move on."

"You can't steal any of our corn-growing secrets. Move on," and the first man shook his club suggestively.

The strange men looked ugly, and the boys and girls, after a pause, turned off in another direction.

"Humph!" grunted Ted, with a curious glance at the place where the men had been. "They made a mistake. That wasn't a corn story. It was a fish story!"

"Maybe," returned Billie. "But what does it mean?"

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE DEAD OF THE NIGHT

THERE was so much of interest about the house, and outside of it, that a week passed almost before the young folks knew it.

The boys were for exploring the cellar, and did so one fine day, taking the girls along.

They had a flashlight, a lantern, and some candles, and all these combined gave them quite an illumination. But the girls kept close to the boys, for the celler was certainly a creepy place, with its many nooks and corners and dark closets.

They managed to find two tunnels, one about fifty feet long and the other close to a hundred.

"Caved in!" cried Chet in disgust.

He was right; dirt and rocks filled the openings, both of which were quite wet.

"I'll bet they led to the brook," remarked Teddy. "When the Indians made a raid the settlers could crawl through one tunnel or the other and so hide in the brook."

"I think Ted must be right," said Ferd.

There was but little of value in the cellar. Old

tools, rusted with age, and some empty bottles and jugs, and that was about all.

"It's awfully musty," said Billie presently. "I'm going upstairs and out into the sunshine." And she went, and the others soon followed.

Billie had received the address of Miss Beggs, the school-teacher. It had been sent to her address at home and forwarded by Mrs. Bradley.

"Now, I guess I'll have to write that letter to the teacher and explain all about the broken statue," said Billie dismally. "Oh, dear, I wish I didn't have to do it."

"It's too bad we haven't the money to pay for the old thing," came from Chet. "Can't we sell some of this stuff? It must be worth something."

"But who will buy it?"

"I don't know."

There was a long consultation among the girls, and at last Billie managed to write the letter.

"There," she said, when she had given it to the store boy to post, "now I feel better. The confession part of it is off my mind, anyway. If I can only pay for the old statue—or buy another one like it—I'll be happy—or nearly happy."

She added the "nearly happy" as the thought came to her that even with the broken statue paid for and off her mind she had still another ordeal before her. In a couple of weeks their vacation would be up at Cherry Corners, and soon after that

she would have to see Violet and Laura and the boys, except poor Chet, go off to boarding school, while she and her brother would be left behind.

Oh, well, she would not think of that just yet. They could at least enjoy the time they were to spend at Cherry Corners.

And they did enjoy it! There was never a minute of the day for which something interesting was not planned.

Then one night, when they had almost forgotten that the house was supposed to be haunted, they had an experience that brought back all their old fears of the place—"and then some," as Teddy said.

Billie sat up in bed suddenly with the familiar chilly feeling up and down her spine and her hair showing a tendency to pull away from her prickly scalp.

The piano was sounding—all the way from treble to bass! And it was the middle of the night with everybody in bed!

She put out a hand and shook Laura and Violet to consciousness.

"Oh, girls, it *is* the ghost this time!" she said in a scared whisper that made them wide awake in an instant. "It—it's playing the piano!"

"A—a musical ghost?" giggled Laura hysterically, but Billie pinched her into silence.

"Keep still," she cried. "There it is again!"

The girls listened to the eeriest, weirdest music

they had ever heard, and Violet slipped shivering under the covers and hid her face with the sheet.

"C-come out of that," cried Billie, pulling at the sheet. "What g-good do you suppose it's going to do to put the sheet over your head? Come on, I'm going to investigate."

With sudden determination she slipped out of bed and stood up.

"Billie," gasped Laura, "you're never going to go down there?"

"I'm going to call the boys," said Billie, who, despite all her determination, could hardly stand up her knees trembled so. "We'll all go and rout that old ghost. He's got to," she added with a hysterical giggle that matched Laura's, "get off my piano!"

Fearfully the girls watched her start into Mrs. Gilligan's room. Then Laura pushed down the covers and got to her feet.

"If Billie isn't afraid," she said stoutly, "I don't see why I should be. Are you coming, Vi?"

"I s-suppose so," said poor Violet, more afraid of being left alone than of facing the ghost in company with the others. "If you're going I—I've got to."

So it was that Mrs. Gilligan was startled to find three ghostly, scared figures standing by her bed calling nervously to her to "please wake up."

"For goodness' sake, what's the matter?" she

said, rubbing her eyes and staring at them sleepily. "Have you heard your ghostly motor again?"

"Oh, much worse!" cried Violet.

"We heard a ghost playing a piano!" said Laura.

"Listen," commanded Billie. "There it goes again. Oh, Mrs. Gilligan, I'm f-frightened."

Mrs. Gilligan listened, and even she, matter-of-fact, humorous Irishwoman that she was, felt that same strange tendency on the part of her hair to stand up straight in the air.

"Well, here's the time for my rolling pin," she said, jumping out of bed and wrapping a kimono hastily about her. "We'll call the boys and see what that piano thinks it's doing anyway."

So they called the boys. The three lads were on tiptoe with excitement at the thought of an actual encounter with a ghost.

"And a musical ghost, at that," crowed Ferd, as they started down the stairs with the girls following cautiously and holding their candles over their heads.

"Say, don't make so much noise," cried Chet in a stage whisper. "You'll frighten his ghostship away. I wouldn't miss seeing a real ghost for anything you could offer me."

"In here, fellows, here's the piano," Ferd directed, and, their hearts in their mouths, the girls watched them go into the dark room.

"Ouch! hang that chair," they heard Ferd cry out.

"Come on with those lights, girls. I'm ruining all the furniture."

Nervously the girls followed them in, throwing the light of the candles on the old piano, but, as far as they could see, nothing had been disturbed.

The ancient instrument stood as dignified and aloof as ever, and in the whole room not a chair was out of place.

"Nothing here," said Chet, looking disappointed. "Say, the girls promised us a regular show, fellows, and they haven't come across."

"What shall we do to 'em?" asked Teddy, looking almost equally disappointed.

"But we heard it," said Billie, shivering with excitement.

"It was just as if somebody had taken the back of his finger," Laura added, "and run it all the way down the keyboard from the top note of the treble to the last note of the bass."

"Oh, you must have been dreaming," said Ferd, opening the piano to examine it inside.

"No, they weren't dreaming," said Mrs. Gilligan seriously. "Because I was very much awake when I heard it."

"You heard it, too?" asked Chet, beginning to be interested again.

"I certainly did," said Mrs. Gilligan, with a grimness that left no room for doubt. "And I'm not given to imagining things, either."

"Well, I move we look around a bit," suggested Ferd, who was always eager for action. "The ghost may have retreated to the dining-room or something——"

"No, siree!" said Violet decidedly. "If the rest of you want to go roaming all over this gloomy old place at night you can do it, but you'll have to leave me out."

"Vi's right," said Mrs. Gilligan, just as the boys were about to protest. "There isn't any use going into this thing any further to-night and getting the girls all upset. I'll stay down here awhile and see what I can see."

"Let me stay with you," asked Chet eagerly.

"And me."

"And me."

Ferd and Teddy spoke almost in the same breath.

"No, I want you all to go up and get into bed," said Mrs. Gilligan decidedly. "If I see anything," she added, with a grim smile, "anything that looks like a ghost that is, I'll call you."

"That's a promise," said Chet, looking back over his shoulder as he reluctantly followed the others upstairs. "Because if I should miss getting a look at that ghost, I'd be disappointed for life."

"Well, I've had enough of spooks to last *me* forever," said Laura, with a shivery glance over her shoulder as the boys left the girls at their door and started off down the hall. "If that piano begins to

play itself again to-night, I'll just die, that's all there is to it."

The girls crept into bed, careful to leave their candles burning.

"You know, Billie," said Violet in an awed little voice, "this thing is really getting serious."

"I should say so," agreed Laura, drawing the bed clothes a little tighter about her.

"Well, it isn't my fault, is it?" asked Billie. "I didn't ask Aunt Beatrice to leave me a haunted house. And, anyway," she added very truthfully, "it was you, Laura, who first suggested coming here."

"Yes," went on Violet accusingly, "and it was you who said you'd be disappointed if you didn't see a ghost or two."

Laura groaned.

"What's the use of holding things up against me that I said when I was young and foolish?" she asked. "Anyway, I didn't think we would really see anything."

"Well, we haven't," said Billie. "All we've done is to hear things——"

"But we've heard plenty," sighed Violet. "There! What's that?"

The girls listened, feeling almost ready to scream, but could hear nothing but the sighing of the wind in the tree tops.

"Only the wind, silly," said Laura, then added

with an almost comfortable feeling at the thought: "Mrs. Gilligan's on guard anyway."

"Yes," said Violet, adding with a sigh that seemed to come from her very toes: "I only hope the piano doesn't swallow her up before morning. I've come to expect almost anything!"

CHAPTER XX

THE MOTOR AGAIN

THE piano did not swallow Mrs. Gilligan up, and, as a matter of fact, the good woman did not stand guard until morning. Half an hour of sitting alone in that gloomy room watching a piano that had played itself was enough to ruin even her seasoned nerves.

Once back in her room she scolded herself for being such an idiot, laughed at her fears, and, being a normal, healthy woman, fell almost instantly to sleep.

In the morning the girls themselves felt somewhat inclined to laugh at the fright they had had, and yet they knew that what had happened had been no figment of their imaginations. The sound, though weird and eerie, had been real—even Mrs. Gilligan would testify to that.

"Well, I tell you what we ought to do," said Ferd, as he sat down to a huge plateful of breakfast. "We fellows ought to take turn and turn about keeping watch. There must be some reason

for the noise the girls heard, and I won't be happy until we find out what it was."

"I think you have the right idea," replied Chet, decidedly. "The only condition I make is that I be allowed to stand the first watch."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, any of you," broke in Mrs. Gilligan, with that slight tightening of her upper lip that the girls and boys had come to know—and respect. "That's a fine way to see all sorts of things that ain't and hear all sorts of things that never happened. Sit up in the dark, waiting for something to happen! I guess not!"

"But we can't just sit back and let the piano perform like that every night, can we?" asked Ferd, in an argumentative tone. "I'd rather stay awake part of the night than all of it."

"Don't you even want to solve the mystery?" asked Chet, in an aggrieved voice.

"Mystery—humph," grunted Mrs. Gilligan, feeling very brave and disdainful in the bright sunshine. "I don't believe there's a bit of mystery in the whole thing."

"Then what made the piano play?" Teddy insisted. "You said yourself that you heard it."

"Oh, I heard it all right," said Mrs. Gilligan, helping herself to more jam. "There isn't any doubt about that. But I have an idea what caused it, all right."

"Oh, tell us," they cried eagerly.

But their chaperone shook her head determinedly while her lip became still tighter.

"No, indeed I won't tell you," she said, adding with a little chuckle: "I want to try it out myself first. For I know that if I told you young ones about it you'd only laugh. And I don't like being laughed at."

"But we wouldn't laugh," Billie assured her earnestly. "Really, Mrs. Gilligan, we'll promise on our word of honor not to so much as even smile."

"Get out with your promises," said Mrs. Gilligan, relapsing into her brogue. "I do be knowing you better. I'll try it to-night," she added graciously, "and if it doesn't work I'll tell you about it in the morning."

"I suppose here's where I spend another sleepless night," said Violet dolefully, helping herself to more biscuits. "Oh, well, I'm getting so I can do without sleep now."

"Well, you don't look as if you'd ever lost a wink in your life," said Chet, glancing at her admiringly, for it was an open secret with the boys and girls of North Bend that Chet rather especially liked tall, dark, peace-loving Violet Farrington—perhaps because she was so much like himself.

Violet blushed prettily at this complimentary remark, and the girls looked at her teasingly.

"Who was it that said something or other was

blind?" asked Laura wickedly, and Violet kicked her under the table.

"Peace, my children," said Billie. "We're having enough trouble with ghosts and things without starting a war among ourselves. Who'll have some more jelly?"

There was a simultaneous shout of approval, and the jelly dish began its fourth round of the table.

However, they did at last get through eating and wandered out on the front porch, where Mrs. Gilligan could not scoff at their ideas, to discuss the doings of the night before.

But it was only a little while later that Mrs. Gilligan put another damper on their fun by announcing that some one would have to go to town for more provisions. The boy had failed to come that morning, and their supply of canned goods was running dangerously low.

"Let's all go," Chet suggested. "We could walk down and ride back."

"But, oh, Chet, it's so frightfully hot," Billie objected. "I'm sure we'd get sunstroke or something."

"Yes, it's a terribly long walk," added Violet.

"Well, we could wait till toward evening," said Ferd. "It wouldn't be so scorching then. I admit," he added, taking a slanting squint at the sun, "that even I am not eager to take a long hike just now."

"But toward evening we'll be preparing supper,"

objected Laura, and the boys threw up their hands in despair.

"Well, then we'll just have to go without you," said Teddy. "But it would be lots more fun if you'd come." This last was said to Billie and for her ear alone.

That afternoon the girls watched the boys down the road till they were out of sight, then turned back to the house with a strangely lonesome feeling.

"You know," said Violet, pausing on the doorstep and looking back at the girls with a rather sober face, "I have a sort of feeling that something's going to happen."

"Well, you'd better get rid of it right away," retorted Laura. "We don't want anything more to happen—especially when the boys are away."

This time Violet proved to be right. Something did happen. It was after dark, the boys had not yet got back from the village, and the girls were setting the table in the kitchen—they had never found the courage to eat in the gloomy dining-room—when Violet set a dish down on the table with a bang that made the girls start and look at her in surprise.

As for Violet, she was too scared to speak for a moment. Then she stammered out:

"The strange motor car!" she said, while Billie and Laura stared at her. "I thought I heard it before——"

"Sh-h," cried Billie, and they listened, hardly daring to breathe.

There was the same strange humming sound that had so startled them on their first night in the house, only this time, instead of coming from a distance and passing by, the noise seemed to get louder, then softer, louder and softer, as if whatever it was were approaching and retreating at regular intervals.

At that moment Mrs. Gilligan came into the room, and the girls called to her to listen also.

"That?" she asked, with a little laugh. "Why that's an automobile of course," and started for the front door. "Only I must say it's behaving mighty queer."

But when they opened the door and looked out into the rocky road there was no sign of an automobile, and yet the humming sound still kept on.

As they listened, wide-eyed, the noise grew softer and softer and gradually died away in the distance.

The girls looked at each other wonderingly. Then it was Billie who offered a solution.

"Mightn't it be an aeroplane?"

"An aeroplane in this part of the country?" Laura was inclined to scoff at the idea, but Mrs. Gilligan and Violet both stood up for Billie.

They were about to enter into a heated argument when they saw the wagon that had by this time become familiar to them coming down the road with

the boys seated in it or hanging to it in characteristic attitudes.

The girls ran out to them and deluged the lads with questions before they had time to learn what it was all about.

"A motor car?" asked Chet. "No, we didn't pass a soul on the way up here."

When the girls had poured into their interested ears the story of the queer humming sound that had just repeated itself, they agreed to one man to Billie's suggestion that it was very probably an aeroplane.

"I'll tell you what we'll do next time we hear it," said Teddy as the boys picked up the provisions they had brought and started toward the house. "We'll go up on the roof. Then we'll pretty soon see whether it's a ghost or the real thing."

"And in the meantime," suggested Chet, sniffing the air hungrily, "how about some supper?"

CHAPTER XXI

BOTH AT ONCE

It was not long before there came a recurrence of the strange humming noise which had so disturbed the girls. It was only a few nights later that Chet sat up in bed with the joyful feeling that here at last was a chance to investigate at least one of the ghosts that haunted the homestead at Cherry Corners.

"Ferd! Teddy! Wake up! What's the matter? Are you dead?" he called to the boys.

The latter reluctantly opened their eyes and looked at him reproachfully.

"Can't you let a fellow sleep?" Teddy asked. But Chet, with no ceremony whatever, hauled him bodily out of bed and set him on his feet.

"Don't talk," he ordered. "Run as fast as you can to the roof before we miss it."

"What are you raving about?" asked Ferd, although both he and Teddy started obediently toward the attic stairs.

"If you wouldn't talk so much, you could hear it," Chet answered, pushing up a trap door that led

to a small square platform on the roof. "It's the motor sound the girls heard and that scared them so."

"It is, for a fact!" cried Teddy in a joyful whisper. "And it's coming right near, fellows, too."

"It's an aeroplane all right," said Ferd, with conviction. "Nothing else ever made a noise like that."

"Say, what are you doing up there?" a girl's voice hailed them from the bottom of the steps, and Chet thought he recognized it as Billie's. "Are you walking in your sleep or have you gone crazy? Come down here quick, we need you."

"Keep still," Chet yelled back. "We're looking for your aeroplane ghost. Can't you hear it?"

"Yes. But, oh, Chet," Billie's voice was tremulous, "the piano is playing itself again. Won't you come down? We're afraid to stay here all alone."

"Great Scott! all the spirits are roaming at once," cried Teddy, straining his eyes to see through the darkness as the humming of the motor came nearer.

"There, isn't that it?" cried Ferd, pointing eagerly through the trees toward a little patch of sky, palely illumined with stars.

"I think I saw it," said Chet, rubbing his eyes impatiently. "It's so confoundedly dark——"

"Oh, won't you please come down?" wailed Billie's voice from the spooky depths of the attic. "I'll die of fright if I have to stay here another minute."

This appeal moved the boys, and they began

reluctantly to descend the ladder, keeping their eyes all the time on the pale patch of sky.

"Where are the others?" asked Teddy, as he reached Billie's side.

"They're down looking for the ghost," answered Billie, as she ran down the stairs in front of them. "They sent me to get you boys, and I found you gone. Mrs. Gilligan," she added, with a hysterical giggle, "has the broom and Laura has the poker."

"Maybe we'd better stop on the way and gather up a few bedposts," suggested Ferd, as they took the last flight of stairs on a run and landed in the lower hall.

"Hello, did you find anything?" sang out Chet, as the girls, looking scared but valiant, came out to meet them. "Where's Mrs. Gilligan?"

"Inside," said Violet. "There isn't a thing to be seen any more than there was the other night. I'm absolutely positive now that it must be a ghost."

"Well, if it is, he's got a sense of humor," said Mrs. Gilligan, rising from her knees where she had been peering into the corner behind the piano. "I've heard of all sorts of spirits, but I never heard of one who insisted upon playing the piano in the dead of night."

"He must have been a musician in his life time," suggested Chet. "That's the reason he comes and haunts the piano."

"Well, I don't see why he doesn't choose a regular

piano to haunt," said Billie, feeling irritable because she was very sleepy and had been very much frightened. "It's bad enough for a live person to play, let alone a ghost."

"And where could it have gone?" wondered Laura, her eyes big and dark with excitement. "The minute we heard the noise—I guess we're sort of listening for it even in our sleep—we jumped up and came down here while Billie went to call you boys. It was playing almost up to the minute we came into the room."

"And maybe we weren't afraid to go in!" said Violet, with a shudder. "I don't know how we ever got the courage."

"Well, you only came because Mrs. Gilligan and I went ahead with the broom and the poker," sniffed Laura.

"Was it playing when you came down the stairs?" asked Chet, interested. "And did it stop as soon as you entered the room?"

"Yes," it was Mrs. Gilligan who answered this time. "And it was good for him he did. I've lost enough sleep through the miserable rascal and I was just ripe for a tussle."

"I don't blame him for running," said Teddy, with a chuckle.

"But where did he go?" asked Laura again. "We were sure that we'd see something—goodness knows what—when we turned the corner of the room."

"And all we saw was a—a large amount of nothing at all," added Violet, wide-eyed.

"Perhaps," suggested Ferd, with a chuckle, "the aeroplane we heard belonged to him——"

"A ghost's aeroplane," murmured Billie, smothering another hysterical chuckle.

"And when you girls came in he just soared skyward and went off in it."

"It's funny we never thought of that," said Teddy scornfully.

"Well, I wish we could find out what it is," sighed Billie, as they started upstairs again. "This staying awake all night isn't very much fun."

"But isn't it strange," asked Laura, stopping on the landing and looking back at them, "that both the piano and the motor should start again on the same night?"

"Yes, it is, rather," said Chet, adding seriously: "I wonder if there could really be any connection between the two."

"There's no use wondering, that I can see," said Mrs. Gilligan, preparing to send them off to their respective bedrooms. "I think the best thing we can do is not to notice them any more. Perhaps the ghosts will get tired, if they find they don't worry us," this last with a chuckle.

"Well, but they do worry us," said Violet plaintively. "Every time I hear that piano, I just about die of fright."

"Listen," commanded Billie, and as they listened they heard it again! The ghost, or whatever it was, was surely making a joke of them that night!

As soon as the boys could recover from their surprise they tumbled down the stairs, tripping over each other in their hurry, while the girls followed more slowly.

But again the noise stopped abruptly, and when they entered the room there was nothing to be seen or heard.

"Say, this thing is making me mad!" cried Ferd, glaring at the old piano as though it were the offender. "I don't mind meeting an honest-to-goodness ghost, but I'll be hanged if I'll let him laugh at me!"

"I don't see how you're going to help it," said Teddy. "Come on, fellows, it's pretty nearly morning, and we can decide then what we'll do to catch Mr. Ghost. I'm so sleepy I'm apt to fall asleep on my feet."

So they went upstairs again, feeling rather miserable and dragged out with excitement, and crawled into bed.

"If this thing keeps up much longer, I'll just be a wreck, that's all," groaned Laura, and almost immediately she fell asleep.

After a little while of staring into the dark, Billie and Violet followed her example, and once more there was quiet in the old house.

Nothing more disturbed them, but they woke the next morning, tired and cross and with a decidedly "morning after" feeling.

"I don't want to get up," complained Violet, turning restlessly in bed and punching her pillow. "I can't get more than one eye open."

"Shall we send for the doctor?" asked Billie, regarding her sleepily. "That sounds like a serious complaint."

"Humph, I don't need a doctor," grumbled Violet. "I can prescribe for my case better than he could. What I need is a rest cure."

"So say we all of us," echoed Laura sleepily. "I'm going to take another nap, girls, and if anybody dares to wake me up, I'll throw my hair brush at them."

"I'm going to get up," decided Billie. "I'll only get a headache lying here."

"Well, I hope you enjoy yourself," said Laura, and settled herself in a still more comfortable position.

While Billie was dressing the two girls fell asleep again, and as she turned to look at them she almost wished that she had followed their example.

"But I knew I couldn't sleep," she said, turning away, "and, besides, I'm getting very hungry."

But when she started down the broad staircase she found that she was the only one stirring in the

house, and a strange, lonesome feeling took possession of her.

"Ugh," she cried, glancing about her distastefully, "it's the gloomiest place I ever did see. I'll be glad when we leave it. That is, I would be," she added wistfully, "if only Chet and I were going with the others to boarding school."

She wandered into the room where the old piano stood and looked at it musingly for a few minutes. Then suddenly a thought struck her, and she clapped her hands gleefully.

"I wonder——" she said, then, remembering an old rat trap that she had come across several days ago, ran into the pantry to get it. She baited it with a fresh piece of cheese and set it carefully on the piano.

"Now," she said, standing back and regarding her work with satisfaction, "we shall see what we shall see!"

CHAPTER XXII

A THRILLING DISCOVERY

It was ten o'clock before the girls finally came down, and it was still later before the boys appeared. Mrs. Gilligan and Billie had had breakfast together, and Billie had confided to the older woman her suspicions in regard to the ghostly player of the old piano.

"But we won't tell the boys and girls," Billie had said, with a delightful sense of conspiracy. "We'll wait and see if it works."

As the young people came in, looking famished, Mrs. Gilligan rose and put some cold muffins in the oven to heat.

"You won't get very much to eat," she warned them. "Billie and I had our breakfast at a respectable hour, and now you've got to take what's left."

"I don't care what you give us, as long as it's food," said Ferd, looking about him anxiously. "I'm just about starved to death."

"It seems to me I've heard that remark somewhere before," said Billie, laughing at him. "Hurry up

and eat, you folks," she added, as she set a dish of fried hominy before them. "We girls haven't really made a thorough examination of the attic yet, and I'm just dying to poke into all the corners."

"Yes, I always did like attics," said Laura, adding, as she swallowed a delicious morsel: "But, I like fried hominy more!"

"Won't you come too?" Violet asked the boys, as, their breakfast over, the girls started up to the attic. "We'd love to have you and you might find it interesting."

"No, thanks," said Teddy decidedly. "I can think of lots better things to do than go roaming about a hot old attic when the thermometer is ninety-six in the shade. I'm going for a walk in the woods. How about it, fellows?"

"Yes, and see if we can come across those old fellows with the beards that told us the corn-fish story," chuckled Chet. "You know," he added, "I have wondered several times since then what the old fellows were up to. Somehow, I'm mighty sure they didn't tell the truth."

"I tell you what!" cried Ferd eagerly. "Let's push on in the direction we were going the other day and see what's being pulled off in there."

"Yes, and get shot most likely," sniffed Laura. "I don't think much of that idea."

"Well, we didn't ask you to come, did we?" Ferd asked.

"No, and I don't think it was very nice of you, after we invited you to our party," Violet put in, trying to look aggrieved.

"Oh, please won't you come with us?" asked Ferd, bowing elaborately before her.

Laura gave him a little push which precipitated him in a rather abrupt manner into a chair and completely spoiled his gallantry.

"I'll get even with you," he threatened good-naturedly, during the laugh that followed at his expense. "But say, fellows, you haven't answered my question. Are you game?"

"Sure we're game," they answered, and Chet added, as he picked up a stick he had found in the woods several days before and had modeled into an excellent club: "If they start any funny business they'll find me ready for them."

"Oh, boys, do be careful!" Billie begged, really afraid that their love of adventure would get them into trouble. "I didn't like the looks of those men. And they had clubs."

"Maybe——" said Violet in an awed voice. "Maybe they're—what do you call them—the fellows that make whiskey——"

"Moonshiners?" Teddy helped her out, and the boys shouted with laughter.

"All the more reason why we should find them out," said Ferd, as they started from the room. "It's

our duty," he turned in the doorway to make them a bow, "to turn them over to justice."

"It must be a disease," laughed Billie, as the girls ascended the old staircase together.

"Well, I hope they live through it," added Laura, with a chuckle.

"I found a funny old closet yesterday," said Billie, as they came out into the musty attic. "I was just going to open it and see what was inside when you girls called me for something. Here it is," indicating a small door, the top of which was only on a level with their shoulders.

"I never saw so many queer things in one place in my life," said Laura, peering down as Billie opened the door. "I didn't know they grew that way."

"We'll have to stoop down to get in here," said Billie, poking her head into the stuffy dark hole disclosed. "And look, girls!" she exclaimed excitedly, as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom. "The closet runs away back an awfully long way, and there seems to be something bulky at the other end of it."

"Well, let's go in," said Laura, giving Billie an impatient little push. "We can't find anything by standing here. Billie, what's the matter?" for Billie had started back so suddenly that she had almost thrown Laura off her balance.

"It's another of those horrid old bats," she gasped,

bending down as an indistinct little shape fluttered past her. "I shouldn't think they could live in the closet without air or anything to eat."

"It probably flew in when you opened the door the other day," Violet suggested.

Once more Billie bent down and felt her way into the narrow closet.

"Don't try to stand up, girls," she cautioned. "You're apt to get an awful bump on the head."

"I've already had one," said Violet, rubbing the bumped spot tenderly. "Goodness, it smells musty in here."

"Girls, it's a trunk!" cried Billie, leaning down to examine the bulky object she had seen at the other end. "A pretty big one, too, and oh," as she attempted to lift one end, "awfully heavy."

"A trunk," Laura repeated excitedly. "That sounds interesting. Can't you pull it out, Billie?"

"I'll try," replied Billie, adding with a chuckle: "But I shouldn't wonder if you girls would have to help by pulling me. My, but it's heavy!"

However, after much hauling and pulling, Billie finally succeeded in backing out of the closet, pulling the trunk after her. Then standing up and brushing the hair out of her eyes, she regarded it gleefully.

"Everything in the house is mine," she reminded them, as she stooped down again to examine the

lock, "so I have a perfect right to look in anything I find."

"Well, nobody's arguing about that," said Laura, sitting down on the floor, regardless of a fine coating of dust, and helping Billie in her examination.

"Hasn't it any key?" asked Violet eagerly.

"Of course not, silly," Laura answered. "What would be the use of a locked trunk if you kept the key around where everybody could see it?"

"Well, I didn't even know it was locked," Violet said, rather heatedly for her.

Billie jumped to her feet and gave the trunk a sudden jerk.

"Girls!" she cried, "did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" they chorused eagerly.

"But, didn't you hear it rattle when we pulled it out of the closet? I thought so then. Now I'm sure. Oh, girls!"

"What is the matter, Billie?"

"I jerked the trunk," explained Billie, while the color tinged her face, "and it jingled! Yes it did, it actually jingled!"

"Billie!" cried Laura looking wide-eyed and awed, "do you mean it sounded like *money?*"

For answer Billie reached down and gave the trunk another jerk. Sure enough, there was the unmistakable jingle of metal against metal as though the trunk were filled with coins.

Their hearts beating fast, hardly able to speak

with excitement, the girls stood and stared down at this new discovery.

"I—I feel like Captain Kid!" gasped Billie, her cheeks crimson now. "Like Captain Kidd when he found the treasure. Girls, do you really think it *is* money?"

"It certainly sounds like it," said Violet in a voice tremulous with excitement, as she reached down and gave the trunk another jerk just for the fun of hearing its contents jingle.

"Well, let's get it downstairs," suggested Laura, wildly impatient to see the treasure, if treasure it were. "We certainly can't open it ourselves without a key. Oh, if the boys were only at home!" she added with an impatient little stamp of her foot. "It seems to me they're never around when you want them."

"Maybe we can call them back. They haven't had time to go far," said Billie, stirred to instant action by the thought. "Come on Laura, you take one end, Vi can steady it at the side, and we'll at least get the trunk downstairs. That's the way! Now then!"

After a good deal of pushing and lugging, and a spasm of fright when the trunk almost fell on Laura, they finally succeeded in getting their burden down to the second floor.

There the girls left it and started hastily down the stairs in pursuit of the boys. They had gone

only half the way, however, when they were startled by a tremendous crash and explosion outside and stood still, their hearts in their mouths.

"Oh, now what has happened?" cried Violet as they rushed down the rest of the steps and started for the front door.

Half way to the door Mrs. Gilligan met them, holding a rat trap in her hand from which hung, suspended, a dead rat.

"Where did you get that?" the girls cried in chorus.

"It's Mr. Rat, the piano player," said Mrs. Gilligan, adding as she pushed past them and ran to the door: "Did you hear that awful noise outside, girls?"

"Did we hear it?" they cried, following her.

"Oh, Mrs. Gilligan, what do you suppose it was?" asked Violet, pressing close to her.

"Somebody is probably hurt," answered the woman, adding as though to herself: "Terribly hurt! Hope it ain't the boys!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WRECKED AEROPLANE

THE girls never remembered very clearly what happened after that. They had a vague and confused recollection of seeing the boys gathered around something in the bushes at the brook that groaned a little and made queer sputtering noises.

Then the boys bent down and began extricating the groaning thing from the wreck of something.

"Chet, what is it?" cried Billie, with an impression that she was living a dream. She tried to push past him, but her brother stopped her.

"Stay away, Sis," he ordered. "The poor fellow's hurt—we don't know how badly—and I'd rather you would go back to the house."

"But if he's hurt, there's all the more need for us," insisted Billie, sudden decision in her voice. "We know first aid. Let us past, boys."

Not exactly knowing why they obeyed her, the boys drew aside and she ran to the side of the prostrate figure on the ground, the other girls following half reluctantly.

The boys had succeeded in removing the man from

the wreckage—one glance about them told the girls that the wreck had once been an aeroplane—and the man, who was elderly, lay quite still, looking up at them with sick eyes.

"Oh, can't we get him up to the house?" cried Billie, clasping her hands in pity and looking appealingly at Mrs. Gilligan. "Then we can send for a doctor——"

But it was the hurt man himself who interrupted.

"I—I'm all in," he said, speaking with great effort. "It won't do any good to move me——"

"But it might," cried Violet, coming down and leaning compassionately over him while her eyes filled with tears. "Do you think—it would hurt—too much——"

"Come on. Let's try it, fellows," said Teddy, speaking with sudden decision. "We can't leave him here to die, perhaps," he added softly. "We can at least make an attempt to save his life."

He bent down, and, putting a hand under each of the man's arms, lifted him slightly, eliciting a moan of pain.

"You take his feet, Chet, and, Ferd, you support his back," he directed. "Now then——"

The boys started to obey, but at the first touch the man cried out in such pain that they were forced to put him down again.

"It's something in here," said the old fellow, while the girls and boys stood looking helplessly at him,

not knowing what to do. He put a hand over his left side. "Something's broken. I—I was trying to —invent a new kind of aeroplane," he went on jerkily, and in spite of the tragic circumstances the young folks felt a thrill of excitement as they realized that here perhaps was the secret of that strange humming noise that had so badly frightened and bewildered them.

"The second ghost," murmured Teddy softly, as though to himself, but Billie, standing close beside him, heard.

"A new kind of aeroplane," Chet prompted, gently but with an unusual light in his eye.

"Yes. And this was its—trial flight," the old man said with a world of bitterness in his voice. "The engine exploded. I guess it shows that I'm pretty much of a failure—in every way."

"I don't see why," cried Billie, her warm heart eager to give him comfort. "There may have been just some little thing the matter that you—— What's that?"

"That" was the sound of running feet and a crackling of bushes, and the next minute two men burst out into the clearing. They were red of face and breathless, and when they saw the old man and the wrecked machine they stood stock still and stared in consternation.

With a start the girls and boys recognized the

men as those whom they had met in the woods that other day not so long ago—the men who had so curtly ordered them to "go the other way."

So the corn story was a fish story after all, and the old inventor's vain attempt to make a new kind of flying machine was the key to all the mystery!

"Are you very much hurt, Dad?" cried the younger of the two men, leaning anxiously over the old man. Again the young folks were startled. So one of the bearded men was the old man's son!

"All in, Son, I guess," answered the old man. With a sigh he laid his hand over his left side and whispered: "I'm all smashed to pieces. The engine exploded."

"Well, let's see about that," said the second of the two men, pushing the younger aside and beginning to rip open the old man's shirt.

Up to that time neither of the men had thrown a glance in the direction of the wondering boys and girls—in fact they gave every impression of not having seen them at all.

The older of the two men was working feverishly—he seemed to be a doctor, judging from the skill with which he tapped here and pressed there, evidently trying to find out what bones were broken, if any.

And all the time the old inventor kept up a feeble moaning.

"He must be very much hurt indeed, or very,

very old," thought Billie as, with one hand clasped tightly in Laura's and the other gripping Violet's arm, she watched intently.

"Why, this isn't so bad after all," announced the man at last, looking up from his patient with a light in his eyes that made him look very boyish in spite of the beard on his face. "Your father's terribly bruised and battered up, Stanton," he said, addressing the old man's son, who had been looking on with strained attention, "but as far as I can see the only bones broken are a rib or two. We'll soon fix you up as good as new," he went on, turning again to the old man.

The latter looked surprised and left off moaning.

"You mean I'm going to live?" he asked incredulously, adding with a faint little attempt at a smile: "Why—why, I was sure I was—done for!"

"No indeed," said the "doctor-person"—as Billie had already dubbed him, rising briskly to his feet. "You'll live to fly many another aeroplane, Mr. Parsons. Now will you let your son and me take you home?"

Such is the power of mind over matter, the inventor hardly made any outcry at all when his son and the "doctor-person" lifted him between them and started off through the woods.

As he turned about, the doctor's eyes rested on the boys and girls and he stopped short, apparently really seeing them for the first time.

"Hello," he said. "I beg your pardon, but I scarcely noticed you," adding, more by way of explanation than excuse: "You see I was very much occupied."

"Oh, we don't mind," said Billie truthfully, adding as the doctor turned toward her: "Is there anything we can do to help the—the inventor?"

"Oh, so he told you then," said the doctor, with a vexed frown. "No, thanks, there's nothing you can do. We'll be back for the pieces of the aeroplane later."

And without another glance the strange trio disappeared into the woods.

For a long minute the boys and girls stood staring after the strange men dazedly, then they turned to each other with a sigh.

"Well!" said Laura explosively, "if everything isn't happening to us at once, then my name isn't Laura Jordon. To think that our ghost turned out to be an inventor after all!"

"You look as if you were disappointed," gibed Ferd, beginning to recover from his bewilderment. "We'll manufacture a brand new ghost if you say so, but it may take time——"

"Goodness, you needn't bother," said Violet, going over to the wrecked machine and regarding it wonderingly. "We've had enough of ghosts to last us a lifetime. My, that poor old inventor must have had a terrible fall."

"It's a miracle," said Teddy, who had joined her and was looking down at the wreck soberly, "that he ever came out alive. I agreed with him at first, that he was all in."

"Well, let it be a lesson to you," said Chet with mock gravity, "never to let your ambitions soar to aeroplane inventing."

"If that's meant to be a joke," said Laura bitingly, "I must say it's as much of a failure as our old inventor himself. Well, girls," she added, turning back to them, "I don't suppose there's any use staying around here any longer. Let's go back to the house."

It was not till they were entering the grim old door of the grim old house that they thought again of Billie's new discovery—the trunk that jingled.

"Goodness! how could we ever have forgotten it?" cried Billie as she, with Violet and Laura, fairly flew up the the stairs, leaving the bewildered boys to follow them.

"Now what's up?" asked Teddy, as he came into the room where the girls had left their treasure. "So many things are happening all at once that it's enough to make a fellow's brain reel."

"It all depends on the brain," said Billie, looking up at him with a twinkle in her eye. And all Teddy did was to look sad and reproachful.

"Say, what shall I be doin' with this?" asked Mrs. Gilligan, and they turned to see her great bulk loom-

ing in the doorway. In her hand she held the rat trap with the dangling rat.

"Gee, where did you get it?" cried Chet, jumping to his feet from where he had been kneeling with Billie, examining the shabby trunk.

Mrs. Gilligan paused a moment and a gleam of humor shot into her eyes.

"You've been askin' to see ghosts, Mr. Chet," she said, with a chuckle, "and you sure have got your wish this day. That airman was the first. Here is the second one!"

CHAPTER XXIV

COINS AND POSTAGE STAMPS

CHET looked bewildered for a minute—then disgusted, an expression that was faithfully reflected on the faces of the other boys.

"A ghost! That?" he said, pointing scornfully at the dead rat. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Chet!" cried Billie, springing to her feet in her turn. "That's another thing we forgot. This is Mr. Rat, the piano player."

"Have you all gone crazy, or have I?" cried poor Chet, looking still more bewildered. But suddenly Teddy saw light.

"You mean the musical ghost," he cried, laughter in his voice. "The one that has had us chasing down flights of stairs on dark nights?"

"With the chills running up and down our spines and our hair standing on end?" added Ferd, following his lead.

"The very same," responded Mrs. Gilligan, the gleam deepening in her eyes.

"But how did you catch it?" asked Violet, for the

girls, all except Billie, who had originated the idea, were as much in the dark as the boys.

"With a trap," said Billie, her own eyes beginning to sparkle.

"But who thought of it?" Violet insisted, ignoring the sarcasm.

"You see before you the girl who invented it," said Billie with a chuckle.

"Great pumpkins, another inventor!" groaned Ferd, and sent them off into a spasm of laughter.

"Oh, tell us about it, Billie," Laura entreated. "You can be the most aggravating thing!"

"Stop calling me names or I'll never tell you," threatened Billie, at which Laura looked as meek as Laura could ever look.

Thereupon Billie recounted to an interested audience the events that had led to her idea that it might be a rat that was making a joke of them all and how she had decided to put her idea to the test.

"Say, think of getting excited about a mouse!" cried Ferd incredulously, when she had finished.

"It wasn't a mouse—it was a rat," corrected Billie.

"But it might have been a mouse," Ferd protested, but Billie broke in again.

"No it mightn't," she said decidedly. "A mouse could never have made noise enough for us to hear when we were upstairs in bed."

"Right you are," said Ferd, taking off an imagi-

nary cap to Billie. "I have to hand it to you, Billie —you're right there."

"You said it that time, old man," murmured Teddy very softly, but Billie heard him and looked up at him with laughing eyes.

"Come help us open our trunk," she said, turning away suddenly.

"Whose trunk is it?"

"Where did you get it?"

"Looks as if it had come out of Noah's ark."

These and many more comments piled one on top of the other as the boys looked at the old trunk, which did indeed appear old enough to have satisfied the most ardent collector of antiques.

"Why, it's my trunk," said Billie, when she could make herself heard above the babble. "We found it in the attic. But I don't see what difference it makes where we got it," she added impatiently, getting down on her knees once more and shaking the trunk as if it were to blame. "Won't you please get busy and open it, boys? Aren't you a bit curious to see what's inside?"

"Is there a key?" asked Ferd, and Billie looked up at him in despair.

"Of course not, silly," she said. "Don't you suppose we'd have had it open ages ago if there had been a key? You'll have to break it open, or pick the lock, or something."

"Say, she's insulting us! Thinks we're thugs,"

murmured Ferd, as he, with the other boys, got down on the floor and began to examine the trunk eagerly.

"Yes, where do you suppose we got our experience in picking locks?" added Chet, looking aggrieved.

"Goodness, I don't care whether you pick the lock or what you do as long as you get it open," cried Billie, half wild with impatience now that the fateful moment had arrived. "You can use dynamite for all I care."

"Maybe that's what's in it," suggested Teddy, and the girls screamed.

"Teddy! Of all the wet blankets!"

"Well, you never can tell," said Teddy, adding wickedly, as Ferd started to set the trunk on end: "Be careful there, Ferd; she may explode, as the aeroplane did."

"Somebody give me something to throw at him," cried Laura indignantly. "Anyway," she added triumphantly, "we know there isn't dynamite in it or we'd have been blown to bits long ago. We dragged it down stairs."

"Yes, and we didn't do it very gently either," added Violet.

"It has a pretty strong lock," said Chet, getting to his feet and rumpling up his hair thoughtfully. "I'll have to get a hammer and a wedge of some sort."

"Oh, there are all sorts of tools down in the tool-house," Billie cried eagerly, and Chet looked at her as though she had said she had discovered a gold mine in the back yard.

"Tools!" he repeated, his eyes shining. "Are they good ones?"

"I don't know anything about tools," said Billie. "But it looked as if there were hundreds of them——"

Chet waited to hear no more. Like a streak of lightning he was out of the room and racing down the stairs.

"Tools!" he was saying gloatingly to himself, "hundreds of them!"

Upstairs Billie turned and looked at Teddy in dismay.

"Now what have I done?" she cried. "If he once gets among those tools we won't see him for hours. Teddy," and she looked appealing enough even to melt Teddy's hard heart, "won't you go after him? You will have to just tear him away——"

However, the two boys were back sooner than the girls expected, for they were very curious about the contents of the small shabby trunk, which had so evidently been hidden away in the darkest corner of a dark closet in the attic.

"Say, those are some tools, Billie," said Chet jubilantly, as he pried away at the lock. "You could do just about anything with them—anything from

making a house, to breaking into one. I say," he added, stopping work to look at her entreatingly, "don't you remember mother saying that Aunt Beatrice left you the house and me—the tools?"

The girls and boys laughed, and Billie patted his shoulder fondly.

"No, I don't remember anything of the sort," she said, imitating his tone to perfection. "But if you're a good boy and open the trunk in a hurry, I'll deed them to you, Chet—every last tool in the toolhouse."

"Honest to goodness?" cried Chet, his eyes beaming.

"Honest to goodness, brother mine."

Then Chet fell to work with fresh enthusiasm on the lock.

It was a stubborn old lock, and required a good deal of patience—which the girls had not—and tinkering to make it give way.

But it gave at last, and girls and boys leaned forward with sighs of pure excitement.

"Open it," cried Laura impatiently, but Billie put her hand on the lid and faced them with shining eyes.

"We'll each have just one guess," she said, "and see who comes nearest to guessing right."

"I bet it's money," cried Chet.

"That isn't fair, I was going to bet that too."

"So was I——"

"And I——"

Billie threw up her hands in despair.

"Of course, if you're all going to guess the same thing it's all ruined," she said, then added, as she bent forward and started to lift the cover: "I don't know that I blame you, though, for I was going to guess the very same thing!"

"Oh, Billie, hurry! You're so slow!" cried Laura, jumping up and down with excitement. "Do get at it!"

"Shall I do it?" asked Violet, feeling an almost irresistible desire to push Billie away and fling back the lid. Why was she so slow?

"One—two—three!" cried Billie, and then the lid was off and they were staring down into the contents of the trunk.

For a minute they stood motionless. Then, as though moved by one impulse, they dropped to their knees and buried their hands in something that jingled at their touch!

The trunk was full to the brim with old coins, many quite rare, while scattered here and there were postage stamps on sheets and loose, queer, foreign looking things that made Billie's eyes glisten as she looked at them.

"It must have all belonged to Uncle Henry," she said, in an awed voice. "Aunt Beatrice once said he had a hobby for collecting postage stamps and old coins——"

"But it *is* money," cried Laura, finding her voice at last, her blue eyes dark with excitement. "Why, Billie, these old coins must be worth a big lot of money!"

"You bet! It's a treasure," said Teddy soberly. Then with a little smile he turned to Billie—Billie who was vivid and breathless with the great discovery. "Allow me to present to you, ladies and gentlemen, our old friend, Captain Kidd!"

CHAPTER XXV

"LARGE FORTUNES"

"BILLIE, it's worth a small fortune!"

"I'll bet the stuff is worth several thousand dollars."

"Yes, every bit of it."

"Oh, boys, as much as that?" questioned Billie, half hysterically.

"Of course," came from Teddy. He was on his knees in front of the treasure box. "See these coins? Gold, every one of 'em—and as big as ten dollar pieces, too."

"Count 'em," cried Chet.

Then began a hasty move on the part of both girls and boys to count the gold and silver. Poor Billie's hands trembled so she could scarcely help.

"I make it the gold and silver alone are worth at least three thousand dollars," declared Teddy.

"And don't forget the copper coins," added Ferd.

"And remember too they are old coins and worth something extra from a collector's point of view," said Chet.

From the coins the young folks turned to the

postage stamps. Chet and Teddy had done a little stamp collecting once and knew that some of the stamps were rare.

"I think they are worth at least fifteen hundred dollars more," said Teddy, "and maybe they are worth twice that. Some stamps are worth a hundred dollars apiece."

It was not until they were called below by Mrs. Gilligan that they gave up speculating about the value of the trunk. The boys went off, leaving the girls to themselves.

"It's too good to be true," murmured Billie, over and over again.

Both of the other girls put their arms about her.

"You deserve it," said Laura.

"I'm awfully glad, Billie, really I am," beamed Violet.

"Why, I'll be able to go to Three Towers Hall!" cried Billie, a little later, when thinking it all over. "And I can send Chet to Boxton Military Academy. Won't that be fine?"

"And you can have enough left to pay for that old statue," added Laura, with a smile. I knew something good would come out of this queer old house at Cherry Corners."

"Well, you needn't take all the credit to yourself," said Billie, the lilt of happiness and excitement in her voice. "Just remember, young lady, that it was little Billie Bradley who discovered the trunk."

"You stuck up thing," cried Violet, putting a fond arm again about her. "Billie, dear," she went on in the serious voice that was Violet's very own, "I'm just exactly as glad for myself that you found the money as I am for you. Because if Laura and I had had to go to Three Towers without you we wouldn't have enjoyed a single thing."

"Yes, we've been worrying terribly about that," sighed Laura, and affectionately Billie patted a hand of each.

"There never was a girl had such wonderful friends," she said, and something in her throat tightened a little. "And it makes the trunk three times as valuable," she added, in a lighter tone, "because it makes three people happy instead of one. Which reminds me——" she stopped short and put her hand over her mouth in consternation.

"Now what's the matter?" Violet surveyed her anxiously. "Is there a pin sticking you, or something?"

"Of course not," denied Billie absently, adding as she rose hastily to her feet: "It just struck me that I've known this wonderful thing for hours and I haven't written home about it yet."

"Well, you'd better read these first," sang out a cheery voice from the door, and they turned to find Teddy coming toward them with some letters in his hand.

"Letters!" was the joyful cry. "Give them to us, Teddy, before we take them from you."

"Oh, do you really think you could?" he asked, holding them behind his back by way of challenge. "Just come on and try. I'll guarantee to hold off the three of you with one hand."

But it was Billie's pleading face that made him change his mind.

"Please, Teddy," she begged, "I've just been dying for some letters from home. Don't keep me waiting."

"All right, your word is law," said Teddy gallantly, remembering that he had read the phrase somewhere and it had sounded very good. "Here you are, and here's one for Vi and two for Laura."

"Goodness, what have I done to get only one?" cried Violet, feeling very much abused.

"Well, your one looks fat enough to make up for our two," Billie assured her diplomatically, then settled back to enjoy her own letters, while Teddy ran out to join the boys downstairs.

One of her letters was from her mother, and with a loving smile she laid it aside to be read last—she always saved the best till the last. The writing on the other envelope puzzled her.

"Now, who is writing to me from Mayport, Long Island?" she demanded, and the girls looked up inquiringly from their letters.

"Another mystery?" asked Laura, for there were

not enough mysteries in the world to satisfy Laura.

"It doesn't look very mysterious," answered Billie, turning the envelope around and around in her hand and finally holding it up to the light to see if she could get any clew to its contents that way. "But I surely never did see that handwriting before. I wonder——"

"Well, why don't you open it?" Violet inquired impatiently. "It seems to me that's the best way to find out."

"Isn't she the bright child?" sniffed Laura, as Billie tore open the envelope and pulled out the letter inside. Hastily she looked for the signature at the end, then gave a little excited exclamation.

"Girls," she said, "it's from Miss Beggs!" And she looked at them with wide eyes, forgetting for the moment that she had no more reason to fear a letter from the teacher. Then she remembered, and a joyful smile dawned on her face.

"Girls, I've been sort of dreading this letter all summer," she said, her eyes sparkling, "and now when it's come I don't mind a bit. Isn't it just wonderful? I have money enough of my own to replace that horrid 'Girl Reading a Book' and two or three more like it. Now," she said, settling down with a satisfied little sigh, "if you'll allow me, I'll read my letter."

The girls watched her as she read and were amazed to see her expression change from satisfac-

tion to surprise and from surprise to something like chagrin.

"Well, if that isn't the limit!" she cried, laying down the letter and regarding the girls disgustedly. "Here I've been worrying myself—and Chet—sick all summer about that horrid old statue and now when I've got the money to pay for it, I find out that I probably wouldn't have had to replace the old thing anyway."

"What do you mean?" the others asked, more puzzled than ever by this flow of words.

"Why," Billie went on to explain, glancing at the letter again, "Miss Beggs says that the statue had been broken before and she had attempted to mend it. She says that I'm not to worry over it, for it would have been only a matter of time before it had fallen to pieces itself anyway. Now what do you think of that?"

"I think," said Violet, with a sigh, "that we have wasted a good deal of time and worry over nothing at all."

"Well, I don't see any use of looking doleful about it," said Laura briskly. "I should think you'd be glad, Billie, that you won't have to buy a statue. It will give you that much more money to have for yourself."

"Oh, but I'll buy a little statue, anyway," said Billie decidedly. "It's awfully nice of Miss Beggs to tell me not to bother about it, but the fact is that I

*re*broke the statue, whether it was broken before or not. And, anyway, I'll be glad to do it now," she added, with a little gleam in her eye, "just to show Amanda Peabody that I can!"

"I say, up there, aren't you ever coming down?" called Chet's voice from the bottom of the stairs, and Laura went out into the hall to see what he wanted.

"We're making plans for the fall," Chet added, and in his voice was a little joyous thrill that made Billie's heart sing. Dear old Chet—if ever a boy deserved to get what he wanted, he did. "And if you don't come down and help us, we're going to leave you out," he added challengingly.

"Better come up here," suggested Laura, adding decidedly. "We can't come down, you know."

"I'd like to know why not!"

"We can't leave the trunk," Laura explained patiently, as if she were addressing a particularly stupid child. "It's too precious."

So in the end the girls had their way, and the boys joined them in the upstairs room which came the nearest to being cheerful of any room in the house, except the kitchen.

At first the boys talked and the girls listened. But gradually the bits of fancy work were laid aside, the girls joined in the conversation, while eyes shone bright and faces glowed with anticipation of what the autumn held in store for them.

And while Laura and Violet and the two boys were talking happily and all at once, Teddy took the opportunity to whisper in Billie's ear:

"I suppose, being a young lady with a large fortune," he said teasingly, delighting in the color that rose to her face, "you won't find time to recognize your old friends any more."

And with a dimpling smile and mischief in her eyes Billie answered him.

"Of course not," she said, adding a trifle more seriously: "Except only the friends who stood by me so loyally and offered to help when I had no 'large fortune.'"

"And are you going to tell me," asked Teddy eagerly, "the names of those favored friends? I know I didn't do anything, Billie, but am I one of them?"

"Your name," said Billie, half laughing and half serious, "is at the very head of the list."

"Do you really mean——" Teddy was beginning eagerly, when Laura called to them laughingly.

"Whispering in corners not allowed," she cried. "Come over here and help us decide what we'll eat for our first midnight feast at Three Towers Hall. We must have midnight feasts, you know."

"Of course we must," cried Billie joyfully. "Doesn't it sound delicious? Oh, we're going to have a wonderful time!"

And just how wonderful a time they had and just

how merry and fun-loving they found the girls at the boarding school will be told in the next volume of the series entitled, "Billie Bradley at Three Towers Hall; or, Leading a Needed Rebellion." In that volume may be met the girls and the boys again in adventures as queer and exciting as those already experienced.

"Well, Billie, you can't complain of your inheritance after all," said Chet some time later.

"Indeed not!" she answered. "Wasn't it the best ever?"

THE END

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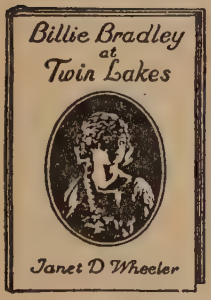

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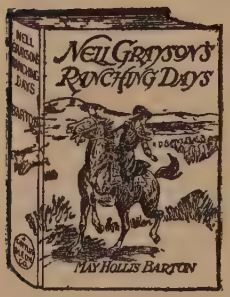

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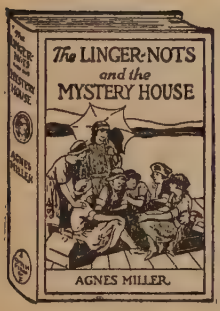

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